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takayaki

ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST



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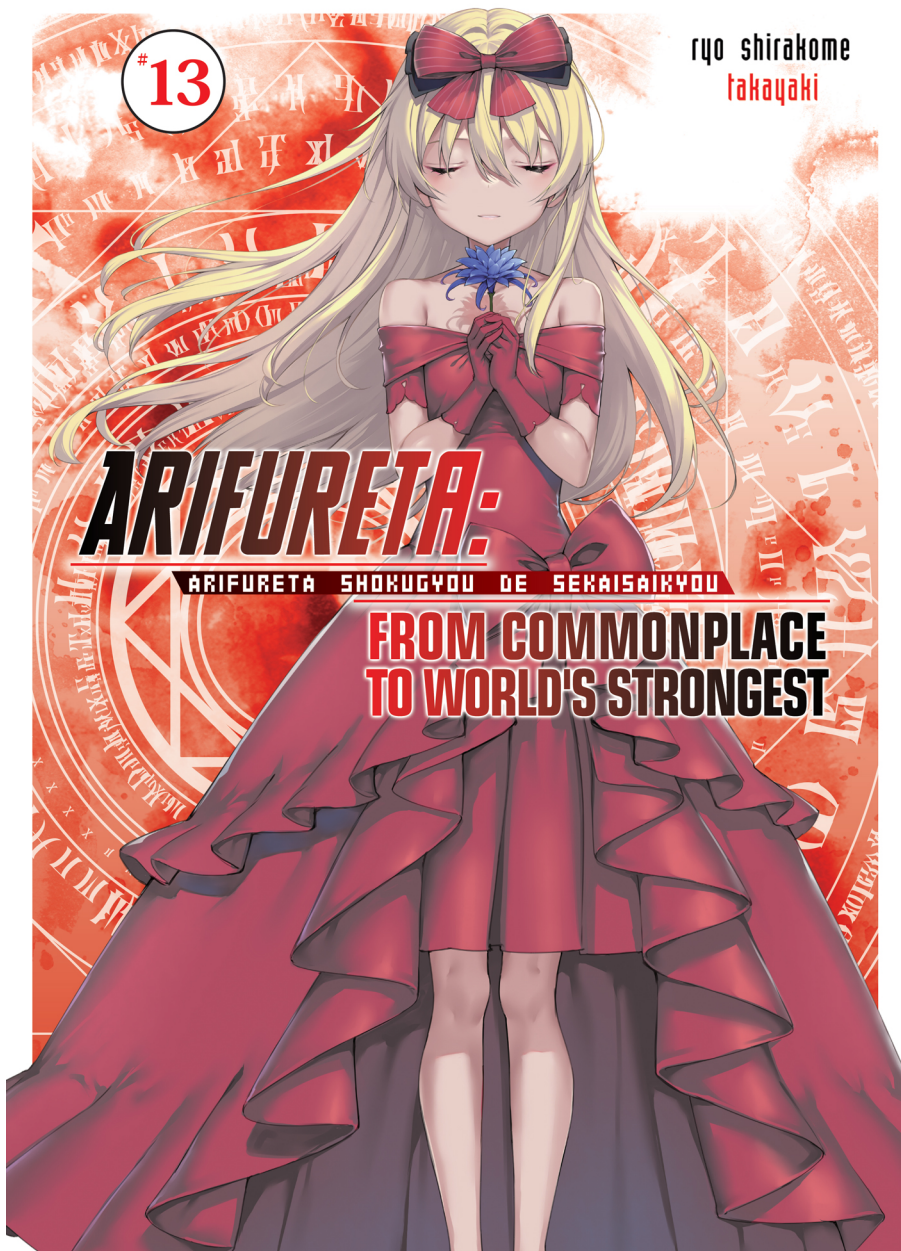
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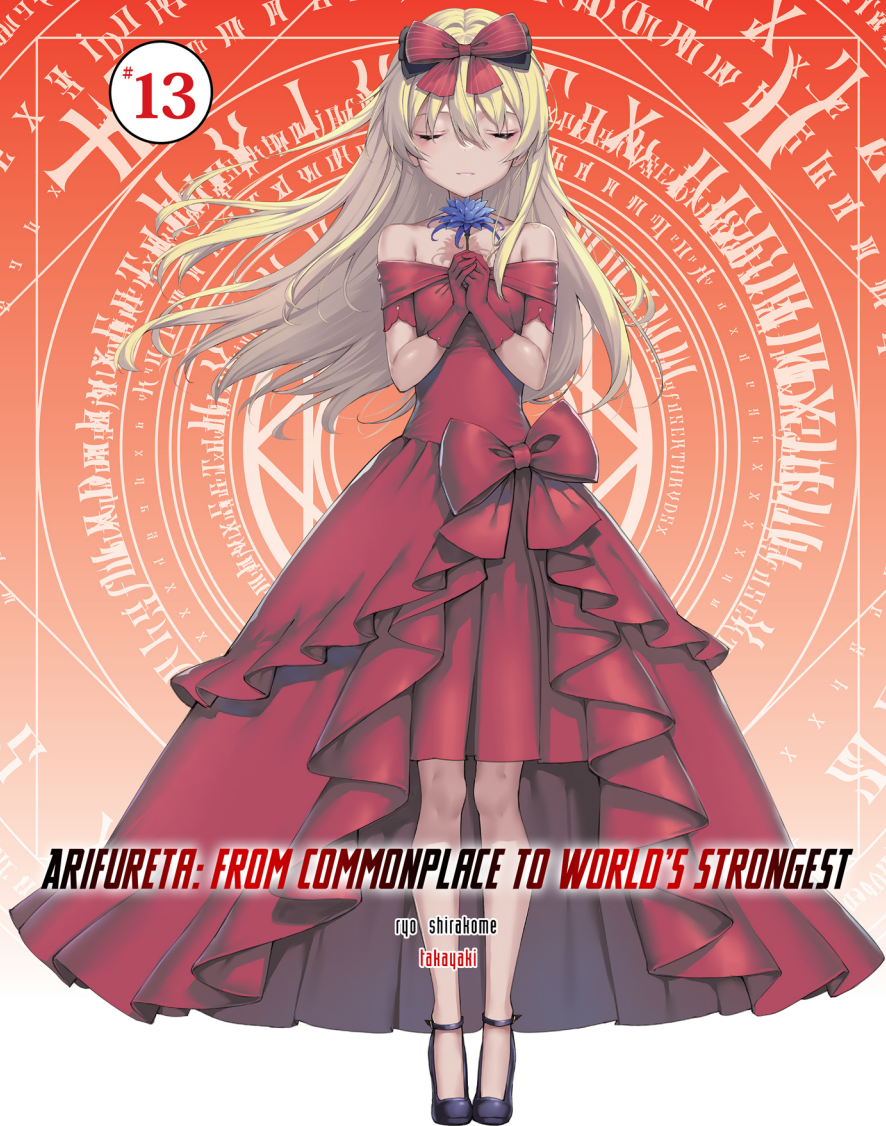
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PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I: HUMANITY'S FULL MIGHT

CHAPTER II: EVERYONE'S BATTLEFIELDS

CHAPTER III: THE VALKYRIE'S PRIDE

**CHAPTER IV: THE TRUTH BEHIND GOD
AND THE FINAL BATTLE**

CHAPTER V: FROM RUN OF THE MILL TO KING OF THE HILL

FINAL CHAPTER: THE END OF A JOURNEY

EPILOGUE

EXTRA CHAPTER: ANOTHER EPILOGUE

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CONTENTS

Prologue

I was plunged into the abyss, a hostile environment that ate away at my very humanity. In there, I had to reforge myself in order to survive. The only way I could live was by utterly destroying any obstacles on the path to my goal. I convinced myself that it would be okay to turn into a monster if that was what it took to survive, to make it home. And honestly, that was the only way I could keep my sanity in that hell. I was sure that if I didn't go that far, I'd stumble along the way and be consumed by the horrors of the abyss.

When I found you, Yue, I was on the brink of going past the point of no return. It was thanks to you that I was able to cling to my humanity. It was thanks to you that I was able to remain someone my family wouldn't be ashamed to see come home.

Without you, I wouldn't have gotten this strong or found so many people I genuinely care about. So how can I possibly repay you for everything you've done for me? I'm sure you'd say all you need is for me to be by your side, but that's not nearly enough.

I don't know what else I can do for you, but at the very least, I'll fulfill my promise. We're going back home, together. I still remember how sad you looked that day when you told me you had no home to return to, so I'll give you one. Don't worry. I know you're afraid my parents won't like you, but I promise mom and dad will be overjoyed to meet you.

Wait for me Yue, my beloved vampire princess. I'm coming to rescue you.

When I was trapped in the abyss, I tried my hardest to become a cold, unfeeling doll. I killed my emotions and surrendered myself to the darkness. If I was doomed to be trapped there for all eternity, I thought I would be better off dead. For a time, I gave up on living. But even as I tried to surrender to my fate, I couldn't help but hold on to one last sliver of hope.

When you opened that door, Hajime, I thought for the first time in so very long that I wanted to live. One look at you got my blood pumping again, and I could hear my heartbeat again, a sound I thought I had all but forgotten. It was then that I realized I'd been lying to myself all along.

You didn't just set me free. You pulled me out of the swamp of

despair and brought me into the light. You healed my soul, which had been scarred by betrayal, and restored my humanity.

Without you, I wouldn't have become this strong or found so many people I genuinely care about. So how can I possibly repay you for everything you've done for me? I'm sure you'd say all you need is for me to be by your side, but that's not nearly enough.

That's why I'm not going to let Ehit beat me. Even if my consciousness is trapped in darkness and I can't even sense my own body anymore, I won't give up.

I still need to see what the home you long so deeply for is like. I need to know what your parents—the reason you're trying so hard to get back—are like.

You told me there aren't any other races in your world, so will they be accepting of a vampire like me? Even if they aren't, just thinking about spending the rest of my life with you and your family fills my heart with excitement. It reminds me that I'm still here, still alive.

Hajime, I love you more than anything else in the world. I'll wait as long as it takes because I know you'll come and sweep away this darkness for me.

Chapter I: Humanity's Full Might

A few days before the world was supposed to end, the people of the capital of the Heiligh Kingdom were going about their lives like normal. Many of them were working on rebuilding the homes and structures that had been destroyed during the demon army's attack.

Seven students watched the hustle and bustle of the city from the palace's terrace as they ate their lunch. Their expressions were somewhat forlorn, even though the atmosphere wasn't particularly heavy.

Compared to when the entire class had sat together to eat lunch, there were far fewer of them now. Of course, the majority of the missing students weren't dead; they were just holed up in their rooms. And considering what had happened the night of Eri's betrayal, it was hardly surprising.

Thus, despite the scrumptious lunch the palace cooks had prepared for these students, they ate without tasting much of it. That being said, eating in awkward silence would have felt even worse, so they did attempt to make conversation.

"Uh, how were things on your end today?" Atsushi Tamai asked, brushing his hair back with his hand.

"I mean...same as usual," Kentarou Nomura replied listlessly as he stabbed at his salad with a fork. He then looked toward his right, to where their party leader Jugo Nagayama was sitting, and nudged him. "Isn't that right?"

Jugo put down his knife and fork before nodding in agreement and saying, "We just helped with the restoration effort, same as always."

Nagayama's party was mostly helping rebuild the outer walls. Kentarou was a Geomancer, while Nagayama's job was Heavy Fighter, so both of them were well suited to the task of rebuilding stonework. Mao Yoshino and Ayako Tsuji, who were a Rejuvenist and Healer respectively, were able to support Kentarou and Nagayama's efforts by bolstering their stamina and replenishing their mana.

"Pfft, is that seriously the only topic you could think of? You sound like my uncle," Mao said, letting out a hearty laugh.

"Ha ha ha, stop it, Mao. You're making me spit out my soup!" Ayako replied, burying her face in her hands.

The conversation had succeeded in lightening the mood a little,

though it had come at the cost of giving Jugo and Kentarou the reputation of sounding like old uncles.

Smiling wanly, Kentarou nevertheless tried to keep the lighthearted conversation going by asking, "So tell me, how are things going with you guys? Patrolling sounds like tough work with how unsafe the streets have been recently."

"Well, yeah," Noboru Aikawa said as he crossed his hands behind his head and looked down at the capital's main plaza.

"But we've got Sonobe, so we're fine," Akito Nimura added, wiping off the steam that had gotten onto his glasses from the soup.

"She's become a local idol at this point. I bet all the hooligans feel ashamed to get a scolding from her."

Everyone else also looked down at the plaza to see a crowd had formed. As always, Yuka was performing in the plaza to help keep the citizens' minds off of recent events. Her job was Acrobat, which meant she was as good at juggling as she was at throwing knives. The crowd oohed and aahed as she dazzled them with a display of unparalleled skill.

Though the Divine Mountain had been destroyed, as far as the regular citizens were concerned everything was still fine because the hero still had god's blessing and was fighting for them.

Princess Liliana's propaganda campaign was working perfectly. Since Yuka was part of the hero's party, from the people's perspective it was as if one of the apostles themselves had come down to entertain them. Her performances helped ease the pain of those still grieving the deaths of their loved ones.

"Nana-chan and Taeko-chan are doing a pretty good job too," Atsushi said.

"And I guess you're not down there with the rest of your party because you aren't?" Mao asked with a sly grin.

"Shut up," Atsushi, Noboru, and Akito said in unison, pouting. They couldn't deny it, however. The three of them were just getting in Yuka's way, after all.

Though Yuka looked like a high school delinquent, she was as straitlaced as they came. On the other hand, her two friends Nana Miyazaki and Taeko Sugawara were as bright and cheerful as they looked. They often teased Yuka, which helped people feel less put off by Yuka's appearance. Furthermore, the three of them were almost always together, so the common people thought of them as a set.

All of that was to say that the three dudes in Yuka's party would have just ruined the dynamic if they butted in, and they knew it.

"Though honestly, I'm amazed by how much she's doing. Not only is she holding those performances, but she's also making sure the streets are safe. She isn't pushing herself too hard, is she? If she

collapses, the city's gonna collapse with her."

"Apparently, Aiko-sensei learned some super powerful magic, so if it looks like Yuka's about to snap, she'll be able to help. Though...I do think she might be overdoing it a bit," Mao replied as she finished off the last of her sandwich. She then turned to look at the corner of the palace where all the students' quarters were.

"Compared to her, we're pathetic," Jugo said with a heavy sigh.

No one replied, since they all felt the same way.

"How's Endou holding up?" Atsushi asked hesitantly.

"The fact that you can remember him should tell you all you need to know."

"The less mentally stable he is, the more his presence grows, right? Man, he's like some kind of urban legend," Noboru said with a frown, which prompted Akito to smile sadly.

"I mean, it's true though, isn't it? Normally, whenever someone brings up Endou, everyone else goes, 'Oh yeah, that guy,' but right now he's on everyone's mind. That's never happened before."

Kousuke Endou was a man who was so forgettable that back on Earth, his family had accidentally left him home alone when they went on trips multiple times. Even on surveillance cameras, he had shown up as nothing more than a blur. In some ways, he really was an urban legend.

However, right now, everyone was worried about him. Normally, only his best friends Kentarou and Jugo even remembered he existed, so the fact that everyone was thinking about him showed just how bad of a state he was in.

"The guy really respected Meld-san," Kentarou said in a despondent voice.

"We can't even cheer up our best friend. How the hell are we supposed to cheer up the people of this city?" Jugo said through gritted teeth.

"I know how you feel. We've been trying to reach out to Nakano and Saitou, but...it's tough going," Atsushi replied.

"Their spirits are completely broken. They're finally willing to let us into their rooms, but even that's only thanks to Sensei and Sonobe's efforts," Noboru added, exchanging a sad glance with Atsushi.

No one had expected Eri Nakamura and Daisuke Hiyama to betray the entire class. As a result of their betrayal, Reichi Kondou, Meld, and a ton of the kingdom's knights had died.

Yoshiki Saitou and Shinji Nakano had been close friends with both Daisuke and Reichi, so their deaths had also hit them hard. They, along with the students who'd already abandoned clearing the Orcus Labyrinth and had hidden away in their rooms, had given into their fear and despair and were on the brink of falling apart entirely.

The only people still trying to rehabilitate them were Aiko Hatayama and Yuka. They weren't professional counselors, however, so there was a limit to what they could do, but both of them had been bringing the despondent students their meals and talking to them every day.

They had made an effort to exchange at least a few words with everyone each day. They didn't want to let any other students die, both in body and soul. No matter how much they were yelled at or ignored, Yuka and Aiko continued reaching out to the students with steadfast determination.

"Most of the girls are showing signs of improvement, aren't they?" Akito asked, prompting a nod from Ayako.

"Yep. Yuka has a girls' talk session every single night. Sometimes, she even cooks Japanese-style food for us or makes us snacks."

"You can tell she's the daughter of a restaurant owner because of how good her food is. She even sews new clothes for us and gets us accessories and stuff as presents," Ayako added with a smile. She also partook in the little parties Yuka hosted, so she knew that Yuka was well on her way to replacing Shizuku as the students' collective older sister. She had surprisingly feminine hobbies too, for someone who looked like a delinquent. Many of the servants and palace guards were smitten by her, and she'd received numerous confessions.

"By the way, we can't talk about Yuka without discussing Nagumo-kun. Though she still hasn't realized she's got a crush on him, has she?"

"She might not have, but everyone else sure has. At first, everyone was scared off by the kinds of expressions she made when she started talking about him, but now they all know it's just how she is and find it cute."

"Yeah yeah," Atsushi, Noboru, and Akito said in unison. They were among the boys smitten with Yuka, but they'd known ever since Yuka and Hajime had reunited back at Ur that they stood no chance.

Still, as far as the shut-in students were concerned, Hajime was the monster who'd ruthlessly mowed down the knights they'd looked up to. Of course, at that point Meld and the others had already been turned into zombies, but watching Hajime's massacre had still traumatized them. He was terrifying, especially since he'd annihilated the demon army with one attack.

In truth, a good portion of their trauma came from Hajime and not Eri or Daisuke. But naturally, Yuka had tried to assuage people's fears.

"You don't have to worry about that guy at all. It's not like he cares about us, anyway... You'll be fine as long as you keep your distance! He's too busy traveling around with his harem to pay

attention to the likes of us!”

She repeated such words over and over again, but the way she pouted whenever she said things like that made it clear that she was just jealous.

“Despite how he treated Lily, she seems to be falling for him too and...I think even Sensei’s into him now?”

Oftentimes, she’d start muttering to herself in that fashion when talking about Hajime as well, saying stuff like “Well, whatever. He’ll find a way back to Japan eventually. We can just ask him to take us with him when that time comes. Knowing him, he’ll at least do that much for us.”

It was obvious from the tone of her voice that she trusted Hajime a great deal. As a result, her insistence that he was actually a good guy went a long way to reassure the scared students. In fact, they’d started developing an interest in him, doubly so because Aiko-sensei also spoke highly of him.

Yuka didn’t realize it, but her love for Hajime was actually helping in her efforts to lessen the trauma of the students as well.

“Well, regardless of what Nagumo-kun might be thinking, it’s true we only survived thanks to him. He’s a bit scary, but I can’t help but think if anyone’s going to find a way back for us, it’s gonna be him,” Kentarou said with a small smile.

“Amanogawa plans to stay behind and fight Ehit though, right?” Jugo asked, making the table fall silent.

After a few seconds, Kentarou’s shoulders slumped and he replied, “I know it’s the right thing and all, but I don’t have it in me to stay and fight. If I could go back, I’d return in a heartbeat. I’m tired of risking my life here.”

At first everyone had been excited to explore a fantasy world, but then reality smacked them in the face. After discovering how powerless they were in the face of truly deadly threats, all Kentarou wanted was to go home. And honestly, most of the others shared his sentiments. Whatever yearning they might have had for an adventure in a fantasy world had been beaten out of them.

They did feel guilty about leaving Kouki to fight the imminent threat against Tortus on his own, but they didn’t have the resolve to stay with him.

At this point, they were just praying Hajime found a way home soon so they could return. Unfortunately, fate, and more importantly, Ehit, had other plans for them.

“Huh?!”

Chills ran down everyone’s spine, and they let out involuntary gasps. Together, they looked up at the sky.

“Isn’t that...?” someone muttered, trailing off.

Hovering above the palace was a familiar figure clad in silver light. Even at this distance, the students could tell the apostle was staring straight at them. It descended in a flash of light, heading for the section of the palace where all the students' rooms were.

"Don't just sit there spacing out! We've gotta go help!" Jugo shouted, running back into the palace. Atsushi and the others hurriedly followed after him, though they knew there wasn't much they'd be able to do.

Let us rewind to a few minutes before the apostle appeared.

Kousuke, decked out in his all-black battle gear, was standing before a small monument a short ways away from the palace. The monument had been erected to honor the knights who had given their lives to protect the capital. Shoulders slumping, Kousuke looked despondently down at the small altar in front of the monument where people placed flowers and other similar offerings.

"Meld-san..."

Meld Loggins, captain of Heiligh's knights, had been the person Kousuke had respected most in this world.

"If only I'd noticed what was going on that night..." Kousuke muttered for the thousandth time in a voice laden with regret and sorrow.

Kousuke had been the last person to see Meld before he'd been killed. It had been a coincidental meeting. Kousuke had pushed himself too hard while training that afternoon and had slept through dinner. Of course, no one had noticed his absence or saved any food for him, so he'd headed to the kitchens to fix something for himself. The food he'd made hadn't sat well in his stomach though, so he'd needed to run to the toilet right after, only to discover it was out of toilet paper. After that whole saga had ended, he'd started heading back to his room, exhausted, which was when he'd ran into Meld.

When he'd called out to the knight captain, Meld had reflexively slashed at his neck. A second later, Meld realized whom he'd almost accidentally killed and apologized. The two of them had chatted for a bit afterward, with Meld asking why Kousuke was out so late, and then they went their separate ways.

Thinking back on it now, Kousuke realized that Meld had been on edge. Normally, Meld wouldn't have lashed out immediately like that, regardless of how badly something might have surprised him.

"Why didn't I ask him what was on his mind?"

Kousuke had been so absorbed in talking about himself that he hadn't thought to inquire about what Meld was doing. Even though the palace felt more ominous than usual, Kousuke had foolishly assumed he'd be able to talk to Meld again the next morning. And of

course, Meld had died that night.

"I didn't even get to repay you for saving my life," Kousuke mumbled as he clenched his fists so hard that his nails cut into his skin and drew blood.

He was, of course, referring to the time when Cattleya had attacked them in the Great Orcus Labyrinth and Meld and his knights had risked their lives to hold off her monsters and give Kousuke enough time to escape. Since that day, Kousuke had never once forgotten what Meld had said to him as he'd run away.

He'd apologized for being so useless, for asking them to sacrifice themselves to save Kouki if it came down to it. But even then, he'd selflessly risked his own life to buy time for Kousuke and told him not to die.

It was Meld who had taught Kousuke the importance of making hard choices when faced with unreasonable situations, and the weight of resolve it took to make them. It was Meld who had taught Kousuke the nobility of self-sacrifice.

Everyone, both Kousuke's classmates and the other knights of the palace, had praised *him* for finding Hajime and getting him to bust through the Labyrinth and mop up all the monsters and save everyone. But honestly, Kousuke had never once felt proud of that accomplishment.

To Kousuke, the real hero wasn't him, or even Hajime, but Meld and the knights under him who'd sacrificed their lives to protect everyone.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

Kousuke didn't even know what he was apologizing for anymore. He still couldn't believe that Meld had survived that harrowing encounter with Cattleya's monsters only to die after making it back to the palace. It had all been so sudden.

After a few seconds, a voice called out from behind him, interrupting his string of apologies.

"Endou-san..."

"P-Princess Liliana..."

Surprised, Kousuke turned around.

Liliana had a bouquet of flowers in her hands. Behind her was her brown-haired maid, Helina, and the new knight captain, the blonde-haired, purple-eyed Kuzeli.

God, I'm so pathetic. Now even the princess and her maid can sneak up on me without me noticing. Some assassin I am.

"You look awful. I heard from Nagayama-san that you haven't slept in days. Are you okay?"

"Oh, um...I..."

"Maybe you should get Aiko-san's treatment."

“I’ll think about it,” Kousuke replied as he bowed his head and turned to leave, wanting to escape from Liliana as soon as possible. It was obvious from his expression that he had no intention of following her advice. He didn’t *want* to be free of his regret, or his guilt, after all.

Head still lowered, he strode passed Liliana and her attendants.

Liliana gritted her teeth in frustration, unable to think of what to say. If even Kousuke’s best friends couldn’t console him, how could she? But to everyone’s surprise, it was Kuzeli that stopped Kousuke.

“No one will be able to replace Meld Loggins,” she said in a firm voice. Thinking he was about to get a scolding, Kousuke stopped and looked timidly at her.

“He was an amazing man. It wasn’t just knights and soldiers who looked up to him; even the common people loved him. He was the shining star everyone strove to reach, as well as a symbol of the knights’ strength and kindness.”

Until now, Kuzeli had been looking straight at the monument, but as she finished speaking, she turned to Kousuke. Her purple eyes glowed like amethysts as she stared right at him. She was tall for a woman, and quite imposing, so Kousuke involuntarily took a few steps back. It was because she looked so intimidating, though, that Kuzeli’s next words came as a complete surprise

“I know I’m not up to the task of being his successor. I don’t have the popularity, the strength, or the resolve that he had. Why, just thinking about having to fill his shoes makes me feel weak in the knees.”

“Kuzeli, that’s not—”

“Your Highness, let her speak,” Helina said gently, cutting Liliana off. The astute maid could tell that Kuzeli was building up to her main point.

“So...what?”

“Loggins-sama is dead...but his legacy yet lives.”

For the first time, Kousuke looked up to meet Kuzeli’s gaze.

“What do you mean?”

“He left behind his teachings, what it means to be a knight, and most importantly, you and your friends, Endou-sama.”

“We’re his legacy?”

“That’s right. That’s why I chose to accept the post of knight commander despite knowing I’m not worthy of the title. I will use everything he taught me to continue to protect the people he gave his life to protect.”

Kuzeli’s expression softened.

“You know, he would often talk about you. He always said he never could quite get a handle on you. You’d always vanish from

sight, then surprise everyone by popping back up. He also talked about how you always ended up in unfortunate situations through no fault of your own. He'd never met anyone as strange as you his whole life."

"W-Wait, he was shitting on me?"

Kousuke wouldn't be able to take it if it turned out Meld had been dissing him the whole time. Tears welled up in his eyes, but Kuzeli just chuckled and said, "But most of all, he said you were dependable."

"Huh?"

"He said that you never stood out, but that when the chips were down, you'd always pull through. He believed you'd become your group's trump card. Of all the students, he was looking forward to your growth the most."

"He...really said that?"

The tears that had been building in Kousuke's eyes began to fall, but for a completely different reason this time. As he sobbed quietly, Kuzeli walked over and took his hands.

In a quiet voice, she chanted a healing spell, closing up the wounds Kousuke had inflicted on himself.

"You've inherited some of Meld Loggins's legacy too, haven't you?" she asked in a gentle voice, making Kousuke grit his teeth. He then thought back to all of the time he'd spent with the kind knight commander.

"I... I..."

I have. There are so many things I've inherited from him.

Kousuke felt as though a fire had been lit under his frozen heart. He suddenly felt embarrassed about how he'd been moping around for so long.

Imagine what Meld-san would say if he saw me now.

His regret and guilt hadn't faded, but he couldn't let that stop him from doing what needed to be done.

Unfortunately, his newfound resolve had come just a moment too late.

A silver streak shot across the sky, heading straight toward the palace. And a second later, there was a thunderous boom.

"Wh-What the—?!" Kousuke shouted, looking up. Kuzeli swiftly moved protectively in front of Liliana.

"Are we...under attack?! But from where?!"

"Your Highness, you must evacuate!" Helina shouted, pulling out her dagger.

"Wait, Helina! That's where...Aiko-san and the others are!" Liliana exclaimed, her face going pale.

Kousuke was already on the move, his body acting entirely on

instinct. Liliana and the others shouted at him from behind, but he didn't hear them. The only thing on his mind was the safety of his comrades.

"I'm coming, guys!" he shouted as he ran.

At around roughly the same time, Yuka was about to reach the climax of her performance. She was currently juggling a total of twelve knives and eighteen apples at the same time. There probably wasn't anyone else on Tortus capable of juggling thirty objects.

"All right, everyone, Yuka-onee-san's about to show off her biggest trick! Let's hear some applause!"

"The one who cheers the hardest will get a prize!"

Nana and Taeko were skipping around the crowd, getting them hyped up. The kids in the front row were watching with rapt attention, and even the adults in the back looked like they were having fun. Everyone wanted to forget about their troubles for a few hours. And Yuka's performances were the perfect thing to help them do that.

In truth, even Yuka had trouble juggling thirty objects at once, but she figured if she messed up, she could just turn that into a joke and make everyone laugh.

"Here we go!" she said in a cheerful voice and performed the ungodly feat of cutting the apples with the knives while juggling them. And as the apples fell, Nana and Taeko brought out plates to catch them and started handing slices out to the children.

"Holy crap, Yukacchi, you've gotten even better than before!" Taeko exclaimed.

"Yeah, I think I might be a juggling master now!" Yuka said with a grin, continuing to juggle the knives. With just the knives, she didn't have to focus completely on her juggling, so Taeko figured she could tease Yuka a little.

"I bet even Nagumo-kun would be impressed by that! Aren't you glad, Yuka?"

"Why are you bringing him up?!" Yuka roared as she blushed bright red and messed up throwing one of her knives. It nearly hit Nana on the head, but fortunately, all of the knives were part of a single artifact. As long as Yuka had one of them, she could recall the others at any time, so she pulled the knife back before it brained Nana. Of course, the spectacle still scared the audience, but then Nana said it was all part of the act, so they breathed sighs of relief. None of them seemed to notice there were tears in Nana's eyes.

"Yukacchi, if you're going to take your anger out on someone, then at least make it Taecchi! I thought I was gonna die!"

"Sorry, Yuka, I promise I'll tease you when you're not juggling next time!"

“Maybe don’t tease me at all!”

With a flourish, Yuka threw her knives higher into the air than ever before and caught them all for her grand finale. As she was putting the last one away, she spotted something up above.

“Hm? What’s that?”

A silver streak was shooting through the sky over the palace. A second later, it barreled into a corner of the palace, making almost no noise.

“Nana! Taeko!”

“Huh?! What?!”

“Yuka?! I said I was sorry, didn’t I?!”

Yuka’s ferocious expression caused the thunderous applause to slowly die down. Neither Nana nor Taeko had seen what Yuka had, so they didn’t understand why she was suddenly so serious. She stowed her final knife and started running straight for the palace.

“Let me through! And get away from the palace!”

The crowd quickly parted for her, and she sped up. Nana and Taeko hurriedly followed after her.

“H-Hang on, Yukacchi?! What happened?!”

“What’s going on?!”

“We’re under attack! I saw a silver flash hit the part of the castle we live in!”

The two of them looked at where Yuka was pointing and paled. It seemed a small section of the castle roof had been destroyed, and no one had heard a single explosion.

“That’s the same color of mana that Kaori has now that she’s changed bodies! Remember what Aiko-sensei told us? The thing that kidnapped her could use magic that disintegrates things!”

Yuka and the others jumped onto a nearby roof and started hopping from rooftop to rooftop much faster than any person from Tortus could move.

In a trembling voice, Taeko said, “Doesn’t that mean...?”

“W-Well, Nagumocchi managed to kill one, right?!” Nana shouted desperately. However, Yuka said nothing. She had no words of assurance for her friends. In fact, she was as scared as they were.

The moment they reached the outer walls of the palace, they heard a huge explosion. In the distance, they could see the colors of their fellow classmates’ mana. Numerous stone spikes shot out of the castle, then a shimmering barrier appeared around the section of the castle that was under attack.

The apostles’ raid had been so silent that it wasn’t until that explosion that the castle guards realized they were even there and started panicking.

Yuka issued orders to them as she ran past, then turned to Nana.

“Nana!”

“On it! Ice Pillar!”

Nana created a pillar of ice going up to the hole the apostle had made in the ceiling. It was a good ten meters away, but Nana’s job was Frost Mage, so she could handle a distance like that easily enough.

In seconds, Yuka and the others had reached the hole.

“Guys! Ai-chan-sensei!”

The walls of the rooms had been destroyed, turning the entire wing of the castle into one big hall. Shinji, Yoshiki, and the other students were all huddling in one corner of the room.

Kentarou stood protectively in front of them, but he was trembling violently and cold sweat poured down his forehead. His trusty vanguard, made up of Jugo and Atsushi, was on the ground in puddles of their own blood a short distance away. Neither of them was moving. Ayako was tearfully casting healing magic on both of them while Aiko desperately cast various spells to keep their souls attached to their bodies. The two of them were clearly in dire straits.

Noboru was standing in front of Aiko and Ayako to serve as their shield, but his war-axe had already been shattered and he needed Akito’s help just to stay on his feet.

A woman with the exact same body as Kaori stood before all of them, and she emotionlessly looked over her shoulder as Yuka jumped into the room.

“Match my timing! Stone Spire!” Kentarou shouted, casting the strongest spell in his arsenal. The ground underneath the apostle then buckled and countless stone spikes shot up underneath her.

“Taeko, Nana!”

“On it!”

“Ice Spear—Sevenfold!”

Yuka threw her brace of knives at the apostle, while Taeko lashed out with her whip and Nana launched a barrage of ice spears. However, the apostle beat away all the attacks with a single flap of her wings. Then, in that same emotionless voice, she said, “Now then, what will you choose?”

In that instant, she vanished and reappeared right in front of Yuka. She punched Yuka in the stomach, sending her flying. That one blow nearly knocked her unconscious, and out of the corner of her blurry vision, she could see the apostle just as easily dispatch Nana and Taeko. The apostle then shot a single feather from her wings, which pierced through Kentarou’s stomach and forced him to his knees.

As Yuka’s consciousness started to fade, she remembered what Hajime had said to her in that snarky way of his back when they’d

reunited at Ur: “You’ve got guts.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Forcing her eyes open, Yuka let out a scream of defiance. She then grabbed three more knives and threw them at the apostle even as she sailed through the air.

“Lightning Field!”

She imbued the knives with enough electricity to kill an elephant. She planned to call them back as soon as they landed and bombard the apostle over and over, but—

“Huh?”

She felt another impact on her stomach and looked down to see her own knife sticking out of it. She looked back up in surprise, then felt both of her thighs get impaled. The apostle had caught her knives and thrown them back with such speed that Yuka hadn’t even seen them. By the time Yuka figured out what had happened, the strength had left her limbs.

A second later the pain hit her, and her body broke out in a cold sweat. But as one last act of defiance, she refused to scream.

“How dare you do that to Yuka!” Taeko shouted, brandishing her whip once more. The apostle’s last attack had broken Taeko’s arm, but Taeko’s job was Whip Master, so even with a broken arm, she could swing her whip at the speed of sound with perfect accuracy.

The edge of her whip shot straight toward the apostle’s eyes.

“Huh? Ah—”

Unfortunately, the apostle just grabbed it out of the air. She then reeled Taeko in and knocked her out with a heel kick.

“Taeko!”

Taeko bounced off the ground and came to rest at the end of the massive room, groaning in pain. Her fingers twitched slightly, but that was all the movement she could manage.

Incensed, Nana held out her hands and shouted, “Get iced, you bitch—Crystal Coffin!”

A coffin of ice appeared to encase the apostle. But the apostle shattered it with ease and continued walking forward like nothing had happened.

“G-Goddammit!” Nana yelled and shrank back in fear and started desperately firing off ice spears. However, the apostle knocked them all down with a single hand.

Yuka kept on throwing out her knives despite her injuries, while Kentarou tried to petrify the apostle, but neither of their attacks worked. Aiko, Akito, and even Mao tried to attack in between healing their comrades, but that wasn’t enough either. The petrifying smoke did absolutely nothing to the apostle and all of the knives and fireballs and lightning bolts were deflected with just one hand.

“Sh-She’s a monster...” Kentarou muttered, falling into the depths of despair. He was finally beginning to realize just how strong Ehit was, if he could mass-produce something like this.

“What are you after?!” Yuka shouted, pulling the knives out of her body and struggling to her feet.

“I offer you a choice. My master has invited you to dance atop his game board.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those who lack the qualifications to be an entertaining pawn, however, will not be granted that right. From what I have seen...” the apostle trailed off, turning to where Shinji, Yoshiki, and the other students huddled, cowering. They hadn’t even tried to fight. “Those over there do not deserve the honor of being a pawn.”

“Don’t act all high and mighty!” Yuka shouted. Though, the apostle ignored her.

“I thought to dispose of them, but Aiko Hatayama and a few of the others prevented me from doing so, even though I explained that those who accepted my master’s invitation would not be harmed. Thus, I chose to fight.”

It was clear the apostle intended to bring Yuka and the others somewhere. However, the students who no longer had the will left to fight were unnecessary, so she was going to kill them. With all that, it was obvious what choice the apostle was asking Yuka to make.

“Screw you! There’s no way we’re going to abandon them!”

“I should have known you would make the same choice,” the apostle stated as she cast her gaze over Yuka, Nana, Taeko, Kentarou, and Aiko.

“So you insist on protecting those who have no value, despite knowing this is a fight you cannot win?”

Shinji and the others looked pleadingly over at Yuka. She knew she must have looked pathetic to them, trembling in fear and appearing to be on the verge of tears.

Yuka gritted her teeth, lamenting her own lack of strength. All she’d done so far was easy work like helping people through their trauma and putting on performances, but now that a real threat had arrived, she was powerless. She hated herself for that, but she couldn’t deny how scared she was. The apostle in front of her was terrifying. At the same time though, she knew there was at least one person who’d defeated this terrifying monster.

“That’s funny,” she said to the apostle.

“Excuse me?”

“Wasn’t one of your comrades killed by someone you once called useless?”

“.....”

The apostle's expression didn't change. Her eyes were still as smooth as glass. Yuka could feel herself trembling again. Nevertheless, she put on a brave front and smiled fearlessly, just as she knew Hajime would have.

"You want us to become your god's pawns?! Fuck that! Tell him he can eat shit!"

Come on, focus your attention on me.

Yuka had spotted a familiar shadow out of the corner of her eye and was trying to stand out as much as possible in hopes of keeping the apostle from noticing it too. That was the only shot at victory they had, so Yuka stared the apostle down with as much malice as she could.

"I see."

Unfortunately, Yuka's desperation clued the apostle in on what was going on. From the moment she'd spotted that shadow, her plan had no hope of succeeding.

"Everyone from your world is accounted for now."

"Gah!"

The apostle spun around and backhanded Kousuke—who'd been trying to sneak behind her and land a fatal blow.

"Endou—eek!"

Yuka tried to fight on despite the failed surprise attack, but as she launched another knife at the apostle's forehead, she suddenly felt something hit her square in the back. As she collapsed to the ground, she saw the image of the apostle begin to blur and realized she'd been aiming at its afterimage. The actual apostle had circled behind her and kicked her in the back.

Yuka never even stood a chance.

"Agh..."

The apostle stomped hard on Yuka's back, shattering bone and causing Yuka to gasp in pain. Her vision swam and her limbs began to grow numb.

"How dare youuuuuu!" Kousuke shouted, once again enveloping himself in shadows and charging at the apostle. His nose was bleeding and his cheekbone looked broken, but he didn't let the pain stop him. He tried to stab the apostle in the chest, but she just kicked the dagger out of his hand as soon as he got close. Not even his stealth powers could hide him from the apostle's supernatural perception.

"Very well. I suppose a use might be found for these failures as well," the apostle said calmly as she launched a series of kicks to shatter Kousuke's right arm, right shoulder, and all the ribs on his right side. The force of the blows sent Kousuke careening into the far wall. He slumped to the ground, the wall he'd crashed into coated with his blood.

“I’m sorry...Captain Meld... I couldn’t do it...” he muttered weakly before falling unconscious.

“Please, stop hurting them,” Aiko said in a pleading voice.

There was no one left capable of putting up a fight. None of the remaining students had been able to so much as slow the apostle down. She’d utterly overwhelmed them.

The group of students who weren’t injured was too terrified to even try anything.

And now, Yuka and the others were watching as a veritable swarm of those very apostles poured out of a giant gate. The sky was dyed a dark crimson, and the area around the gate to the Sanctuary was spewing forth a black miasma. The whole thing looked like a scene from a nightmare.

Hajime and his comrades had headed right through that gate to put an end to this nightmare, but those left back on Tortus still had an army of apostles to deal with.

Yuka could hear the thunderous cheering of the alliance of mortal races behind her. Her body was trembling, and though she wished she could tell herself it was in anticipation, she knew deep down she was afraid.

In a few moments, the battle which would decide humanity’s survival, and their own future, would begin. It would undoubtedly be her hardest battle yet. Honestly, she wouldn’t even be surprised if she died a few seconds in. This battle would determine whether it was god or man who got to decide the fate of this world.

Yuka would have felt a lot more reassured if Hajime and the others had been with her. Of course, she was glad they’d managed to break through to the Sanctuary, but still, she wished they were by her side instead.

No, I can’t keep relying on them forever. I need to start fighting for myself. If I keep relying on others, how am I going to protect anyone, much less myself?

Yuka gritted her teeth and forced herself to stop shivering. The events at the Demon Lord’s castle had lit a fire in her heart. Hajime, the one man who never gave up no matter how bad things got, had said that he knew everyone back on Tortus would be fine because Yuka was there. He’d said that he could trust her.

Yuka repeated those words to herself in her head, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

I can do this!

She then opened her eyes, her doubts gone. Calmly, she gripped the standard-issue artifact necklace Hajime had given to everyone and looked around.

Since she was standing atop the fortress, she had a good view of the entire battlefield. Stationed directly in front of the fortress was Gahard's imperial army. On the east flank was the Heiligh Kingdom's army, headed by Knight Commander Kuzeli, with Lanzwi's desert warriors on the west. To the south was half of Verbergen's beastmen army, with the remaining warriors stationed on the walls and towers farther out to the east and west. Adul and the other dragonmen were spread about in the same way.

Most of the adventurers who'd volunteered had been assimilated into each army's reserves, since they were the most flexible unit. They were in charge of plugging any holes that appeared in the various armies' formations, as well as taking down any apostles that got past the front lines.

All told, the combined forces of Tortus numbered a few hundred thousand strong, with every race represented.

Behind Yuka, the new pope, Simon, and his clergy were standing in a magic circle carved into the tallest point of the fortress. Simon was completely unlike his predecessor. He had an actual sense of humor, and he valued human life far more than his faith. When Yuka met his gaze, he gave her a reassuring wink.

In the past, he'd argued that humans should treat beastmen as equals, and had been exiled from the capital for his views. Had it not been for Liliana's intervention, he likely wouldn't have been appointed the new pope. All of the clergy who followed him shared his brazen confidence and somewhat radical views. If anything, David and the other Templar Knights charged with guarding the priests looked more nervous than they did.

"We can win this, right?" Yuka muttered quietly, turning to look at her classmates, who were lined up next to her. Most of them were looking worriedly up at the sky. Just like Yuka, they remembered the thrashing a single apostle had given them.

The nine students who'd remained holed up in their rooms until now looked like they might faint. Yuka couldn't blame them. Enough apostles were pouring out of that gate to blot out the sky. The only reason the apostle had let those students live was because she thought they would serve as good hostages for Yuka and the students who had fought.

Fortunately, Hajime had immediately accepted the Demon Lord's invitation. Had he not, Yuka would have been forced to become Ehit's pawn and try to convince him, or the apostles would kill the student hostages one by one. Now, with Hajime gone, everyone was remembering just how terrifying these emotionless monsters could be.

"Don't worry! I won't let anyone die!" Kaori said confidently, puffing her chest out proudly. Among Hajime's companions, she was

the only one who'd stayed behind to help the people back on Tortus.

"Nagumo-kun will defeat god for sure! As long as we can hold out and protect each other until then, we'll all be able to go home!" Aiko declared, trying to psych her students up. Though she looked small and unreliable, she was always doing her best for her students, so they respected her immensely for it.

Thanks to her and Kaori's words of encouragement, the students regained a measure of their earlier resolve.

However, in the end, they all turned to the one they considered their leader. Not Kaori, not Aiko, but Yuka Sonobe.

Kaori and Aiko both knew it was Yuka that everyone looked up to, which was why they nodded to her and stepped back to let her speak. Yuka nodded back, then turned to the students.

"We've got this, guys."

Thus far, the apostles had been milling about the gate, seemingly wondering whether or not they should chase after Hajime. But now they were beginning to turn their attention to the armies on the ground.

Despite her fear, Yuka gazed resolutely back up at them. No matter how terrifying the foe, she knew she wouldn't falter ever again. Raising her voice she shouted, "You all know how ruthless Nagumo is, don't you? Right now, we have that monster of the abyss's protection on our side!"

Yuka met each student's gaze, and everyone clasped the artifact necklaces he'd given them.

"The judgment of Lord Ehit is upon you!" the apostles said in unison, their voices echoing directly in the minds of everyone. But Yuka just smiled fearlessly, just as Hajime would have.



“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared, but you know, I’m more pissed off than I am scared right now. These bastards kidnapped us, decided we only had value as hostages, and now that they’re done with us they want us all to die? Fuck that! We’re not Ehit’s toys! Isn’t that right, guys?!”

Cries of “Yeah, fuck him!” and “You’ve got that right!” rang out among the students.

Their anger began to overtake their fear, reinforcing their resolve and giving them the strength to keep fighting.

“I won’t let them lay a finger on any of my friends. I don’t want to lose anyone else! We’re going to take those apostles down and—”

The apostles started diving toward the armies. There were about five thousand of them in total. With her back to them, Yuka smiled gently at the students and finished with “And we’re all going to go home. Together.”

The students cheered, their eyes glimmering with determination.

A second later, they all heard Liliana’s voice ringing in their heads.

“Central command to all forces. We’re sticking to plan A. Everyone, brace for the incoming barrage!”

Countless beams of silver light shot down at the armies, signaling the start of the battle to decide the fate of Tortus.

The torrent of disintegration attacks normally would be more than enough to obliterate anyone not as powerful as Hajime. It was thanks to this power of theirs that the apostles believed they’d still be able to easily destroy humanity despite letting Hajime destroy the Sacred Mountain, annihilate all of Ehit’s monsters, and even destroy a significant chunk of the apostles on his way into the Sanctuary.

They were expecting this to be not a battle, but a one-sided slaughter. But of course, things didn’t go as planned.

“Deploy the Canopy!”

The Canopy was a repurposed version of the great barrier that had once protected Heiligh’s capital. Rather than consisting of three dome-shaped layers, it was a single two-kilometer-wide sheet that appeared directly above the army. Though it took an inordinate amount of mana to maintain, it was enhanced with spatial magic barriers and restoration magic self-healing powers, making it a nigh-indestructible barrier.

Humanity’s strongest barrier did indeed manage to stop the barrage of disintegration rays.

“You’re just wasting your time,” one of the apostles said flatly, her eyes narrowing slightly. The barrier was a single unbroken sheet that hovered a few hundred meters in the air. It was one thing if a person

was controlling it, but since it was deployed by an artifact, that meant it blocked anything that touched it—both from above and below. The armies on the ground were safe from disintegration beams, but they couldn't counterattack either. Furthermore, regardless of how powerful this artifact was, it wouldn't be able to survive a concentrated barrage of disintegration attacks indefinitely.

Just as the apostles expected, the barrier shattered into shards of light after only a few minutes. The rain of deadly silver light once again began bearing down on the armies below. But before it could hit, Liliana shouted, "Counterattack, now!"

The apostles stared in awe as a volley of cannon fire, missiles, rockets, and Gatling gun fire shot out from the fortresses and walls and towers situated on the battlefield. The bombardment they'd expected, but what had caught them by surprise was what happened to their own disintegration beams.

"Teleportation defenses!" the apostles exclaimed. Indeed, all of their attacks had been sent back at them via enlarged versions of Hajime's personal Orestes.

The apostles were so preoccupied with dodging their own attacks that they weren't able to evade the barrage of missiles and bullets. The forces of Tortus had such an overwhelming advantage in numbers that they were able to fire off barrages with much higher density than the apostles too. On top of that, the Haulia snipers were so insanely skilled that they could accurately hit a target even from eight kilometers away.

Plus, Kaori was supplementing the barrage with her own disintegration beams, while Aiko had taken over the seven Hyperions Hajime had left behind when busting into the Sanctuary and was firing off high-powered lasers left and right.

Each of those attacks was powerful enough that the apostles couldn't just shrug them off either. Thus, they resorted to trying to cut down the various attacks with their claymores, or wrapping their wings around themselves and focusing on absolute defense, but even so, a good number of them started dropping.

"I see. So that barrier was simply buying time for you to pinpoint where our attacks would land," one of the apostles said as she caught a glimpse of the fortress through the missile barrage.

Normal people couldn't freely control the teleportation rings like Hajime, since they lacked the ability to directly manipulate mana. So instead, Liliana had deployed the barrier to give people time to calculate the point of impact of the apostles' attacks and manually move the rings to the correct locations in groups of three. After that, all they'd had to do was say the simple incantation of "portal" and the rings activated.

After going through the portal, the beams were shot back out of the paired gates that were installed at set intervals along the walls around the fort.

Meanwhile, on the lowest basement floor of the fortress, another team was hard at work.

“Get me numbers four through twelve! And hurry up on the repairs to number seven!”

“Roger!”

“Seven’s been repaired, sir!”

The Heiligh Kingdom’s finest Synergist, Volpen, was barking out orders as he oversaw the emergency repair of the Canopy.

The artifact’s main body, which was a transparent pillar as thick as a tree trunk, was situated down here. Though it looked like one single object, it was actually made of distinct three-dimensional blocks that all connected like a lego puzzle. Damaged or overheated blocks could be replaced with identical spares to quickly get the entire thing up and running again.

Of course, removing and attaching parts took a good deal of Transmutation skill because of how delicate the magic circles on the blocks were, but as long as you had a bit of training, even an average Synergist could repair this godlike artifact.

“Volpen-sama, the Canopy has been repaired!”

“Good,” Volpen said, nodding to his subordinate. He then activated the communicator connected to central command.

“Princess, we’ve finished repairing the barrier!”

“Perfect. Reactivate as soon as possible. Give me constant updates on the number of spare parts and mana you have left!”

“Of course, Your Highness!”

Volpen quickly redeployed the Canopy.

“So long as we are willing to sustain casualties...” one of the apostles muttered as she saw the barrier reappear.

There were almost five thousand of them in total, and they could coordinate with each other perfectly. Moreover, they didn’t care at all about any of their comrades. If they were willing to sacrifice a few hundred of their number, they could easily concentrate their forces on one spot and break through before the rings could be moved to the correct positions.

The apostles began to glow as they activated their pseudo-Limit Breaks and assumed assault formation. But just then, they got hit by the next in the long list of anti-apostle countermeasures Hajime had cooked up.

“Hm? Wait...it can’t be!”

The deafening roar of missile explosions and gunfire died down as the barrier redeployed, allowing the apostles to hear the sound they’d

been drowning out until now. This was a sound they recognized all too well, since they had tried using it against Hajime once before.

“Lalalaaaaaa!”

It was the sound of a hymn. Specifically, the Hymn of Ruin, which debuffed whoever it targeted.

To think we would be taking down the apostles with a song made to weaken the heretics who opposed Ehit. Heh, that youngster sure likes to twist the knife.

Pope Simon smiled faintly as he solemnly intoned the Hymn of Ruin. Though Aiko and Yuka both thought of him as a weird old geezer, despite his eccentricities, he did have the skills and strength to serve as a proper pope.

“Simon-sama. Please strike down the vile minions of that evil god,” Liliana said through her telepathic communicator.

“Ho ho ho, as you wish, Your Highness.”

Simon banged his staff on the dais he was standing on. Both his staff and the dais he was smacking it against were artifacts, with the dais working to concentrate and amplify the powers of the hymn.

“Take a good look, apostles, this is just one of humanity’s many trump cards—Heavenbreaker!”

A large, pure-crimson magic circle then appeared on the dais. It appeared he’d activated the powerful evolution magic spell that buffed multiple allies’ stats by a ludicrous amount, Limiter Removal, as well as the evolution magic spell that lowered the strength of the caster’s enemies, Core Seal.

The true nature of evolution magic was the ability to interfere with the discrete bits of information that made up a person or object. However, while lightly adjusting parameters wasn’t too difficult, rewriting them completely was an impossibly difficult feat.

Fortunately, while the apostles were legion, they were in effect one single target because they were perfect copies of each other. On top of that, Hajime had already had plenty of time to study Noint’s body. With Kaori’s help, he’d easily been able to manufacture an artifact capable of affecting them.

“Ngh! Our power has been halved?! No, we’ve lost even more than that!”

The auras of silver light that had been enveloping the apostles dissipated, and were replaced by a malicious red aura that lowered their abilities significantly. The debuffs were so strong they even affected the apostles’ mobility.

Down below, the armies let out resounding cheers. Thanks to their superior eyesight, the apostles could easily see that every single soldier down below had been significantly strengthened.

“This still changes nothing.”

Even at a mere forty percent of their power, the apostles were far stronger than any human. Unfortunately, they now lacked the strength to quickly break through the Canopy at a single concentrated point and charge the forces down below. Or rather, they could still do it, but the casualties would mount too high.

“In that case, we simply need to attack from the side.”

The only reason the Canopy was so powerful was because it sacrificed omnidirectional coverage for focused defensive power.

Two thousand apostles broke away from the main unit and circled around to the armies’ side. The remaining apostles maintained their barrage so that the detachment could swoop in and make short work of the priests singing the Hymn of Ruin.

They came in from the north, two thousand silver comets rushing toward the fortress at an extremely low altitude.

“I leave all field decisions to you, Commander Gahard. Good luck!” Liliana said.

“You got it,” Gahard D Hoelscher, supreme commander of the combined Tortus forces and a peerless, reckless warrior, proclaimed as he mounted his warhorse. He then stared down the oncoming apostles like a wild beast looking at its prey, then lowered the visor of his helmet with a grin.

Raising his sword high in the air he shouted, “Gunners, take aim!”

There were, of course, large contingents of gunners stationed on the fortress and the surrounding walls, but there were also riflemen mixed in with the infantry out on the front lines. The rifles had easily reloadable magazines that rotated automatically, allowing for easy, automatic fire. Each magazine was also charged with enough electricity to rail gun accelerate each of its six shots. The bullets were all large-caliber exploding shots as well, since Hajime had assumed the evolution-magic-enhanced soldiers would be able to handle the heavier recoil.

“Rejoice, all of you wannabe heroes! This is your chance to leave your mark on history! Fire!”

Not even bothering to hide his excitement, Gahard gave the order to fire. Bolstered by his rousing speech, the tens of thousands of gunners fired at once.

The Canopy was deployed about sixty meters above the ground, meaning the apostles had very little vertical leeway to dodge the veritable wall of bullets heading their way. Furthermore, since the bullets didn’t have to fight gravity just to reach their target, they retained a lot more of their blistering initial speed.

Hajime’s guns were truly deadly because they didn’t require their users to be particularly powerful to unleash extremely powerful physical-magical hybrid attacks. Even an apostle would take serious

damage braving that barrage head-on.

Any attempt at counterattacking without bothering to defend would see the apostles dead. But even if they blocked with their claymores, they'd be stopped in their tracks and slowly whittled down until they were defeated. So instead, they used their wings purely for defense to nullify the bullets' shock waves and allow them to keep advancing, albeit slowly.

"Damn you, Irregular. Is there no end to your interference?!"

The apostles were beginning to grow uncharacteristically irritated. Of course, the soldiers down below didn't realize that was partly due to the fact that Hajime had instantly obliterated two hundred of their brethren in the Sanctuary without even breaking a sweat.

Still, that was only part of the cause of their irritation. The main reason they were getting so frustrated was that despite switching to a spindle formation and focusing on defense, the apostles at the outer edges of the formation were getting picked off one after another.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! Looks like the only strategy you idiots know is charging headfirst at the enemy! Fools like you are easy pickings for Baltfeld the Executioner!"

The Haulia's premiere sniper, Baltfeld the Executioner—aka Par—cheered as he shot down another apostle, aiming for the minute gap between her wings.

"Get me more bullets! I'm running out!"

"Hya ha ha ha! That's one hell of a fireworks display!"

The other Haulia snipers cackled maniacally at each other, while the beastmen resupply unit pretended not to see anything as they replenished their ammo stores. They knew that if they engaged with the Haulia, they'd end up as insane as them. In fact, they didn't even want to admit that the Haulia were fellow beastmen. Regardless, the fact remained that the Haulia were extremely effective when the apostles' aerial mobility was limited.

"Your tricks end here."

Despite the dense barrage, the apostles were able to advance halfway through Gahard's formation in the span of a few seconds. They used their sturdy bodies as shields and focused purely on defense, so they weren't able to counterattack, but that single-minded focus did let them break through Gahard's formation with only light casualties.

Or so they thought, anyway.

"Your Highness, they've reached the designated point!" a messenger said to Liliana in the command tower.

"Perfect. Then let's show them how much of an advantage numbers give."

Liliana touched the jewel on her necklace and sent a message to

the entire army.

“Brave men and women of Tortus, we’re moving to phase two! Activate Grav Farenzen!”

A second later, all of the apostles started falling toward the ground.

“A gravity field?”

The apostles looked around and saw crimson jewels set up at various points around the battlefield. Soldiers had activated them all at once, creating a gravity field right underneath the Canopy to prevent anyone from flying under it. Once they were grounded, the armies of Tortus would finally be able to utilize their numbers advantage instead of being unilaterally bombarded from the air.

Unfortunately, gravity magic was mana intensive, so they couldn’t spread the anti-flight field over the whole battlefield and still make it strong enough to drag down enemies as powerful as apostles.

That was actually the main reason for the Canopy’s existence. It split the airspace into two sections, allowing the armies of Tortus to focus the gravitational field in one area and amplify its effectiveness.

As a result, not even the apostles could take flight again in this superdense gravity field. A moment before the apostles hit the ground, a barrage of missiles struck them, shattering their spindle formation. They were sent flying in all directions and were forced to scatter even further to avoid the follow-up attacks coming their way, so they found themselves isolated in the middle of the enemy’s formation.

“Here they come! Don’t fear death, you louts! Overwhelm them with numbers and kill them all! It’s time to show your worth as warriors!” Gahard shouted, charging headfirst at an apostle himself. The empire’s armies, Heiligh’s armies, Ankaji’s armies, and Verbergen’s armies all cheered and followed suit.

There was a series of resounding crashes as the apostles all hit the ground, creating tiny craters all over the battlefield. They landed in a kneeling posture, their faces looking downward, which made their expressions unreadable.

“Surround her! Let’s do this!”

“Uwooooooooooh!”

The imperial soldiers swarmed the apostle near them, confident that they’d already won. But then a series of silver streaks shot out from the apostle in all directions. She’d fired her feathers in a scattershot blast, much like a shrapnel grenade.

The soldiers screamed in pain as they were sent flying back.

“Don’t falter! We can beat her!” one of the nearby officers shouted, and another wave of soldiers surged forward.

“As if humans stand a chance against us...”

The apostle slowly got to her feet and summoned her dual

claymores. Even with their stats greatly reduced and their ability to fly sealed, there was a massive gap between the abilities of an apostle and a human.

Apostles were just on a completely different level, after all. The various stratagems the human forces had come up with had been annoying to be sure, enough to actually irritate the normally emotionless apostles, even, but annoying was all they'd been.

The apostle gracefully spun in a circle, her claymores mowing down swathes of imperial soldiers. The shock waves created by her slashes sent the soldiers in full plate armor flying as though they weighed nothing.

"But why..."

However, it was once again the apostle who appeared confused, not the soldiers.

That was because even though her claymores were coated in disintegration magic, her slashes weren't actually cutting through any of the soldiers. She shouldn't have been feeling the impact of any of her slashes, since they were meant to be bisecting people instead of sending them flying. With that one display, she should have killed dozens of people, but instead, she'd only succeeded in injuring them.

"Gah... They're working... Our defenses are working!"

"I could see that swing! It was fast, but I could still dodge in time!"

The soldiers that had been sent flying started getting back to their feet. Most of the ones that had been hit by the disintegration feathers were getting up as well. Only those unlucky enough to have been pierced through the head had died.

For everyone else, it was only their armor that had been damaged. Granted, it was significant damage, but still, the soldiers' armor had protected their bodies. Fortunately, their armor didn't stay broken for long. Crimson light enveloped the soldiers and their armor started repairing itself.

Awestruck, the apostle muttered, "Don't tell me..."

Out of the corner of her vision, she saw a warhorse charging toward her. She pointed one of her claymores at it and launched a disintegration beam. The beam caused the horse to stumble and fall, but its rider just leaped off and continued his assault.

"Hiyaaaaaaaaah!"

With a spirited yell, Gahard D Hoelscher swung down at the apostle. She raised her second claymore to block, but then Gahard redirected his sword and changed his downward slash to a horizontal one. And honestly, even the apostle was impressed by such a perfect feint.

As the head of a mercenary empire that valued strength above all

else, Gahard was naturally one of the best swordsmen alive. His godlike swordsmanship let him slip past the apostle's defenses and slice right at her neck. But the apostle wasn't worried. After all, her body was harder than steel. A regular human weapon wouldn't even be able to scratch her. Or so she thought.

"Ah!"

"This is what you get for being overconfident!" Gahard exclaimed with a grin, baring his teeth.

It was only as her vision started to spin that the apostle realized she'd been decapitated and her head was flying through the air.

She didn't ask why; the red glow coming from Gahard's sword and the faint *bzzzzzz* noise told her everything she needed to know. The apostle's body could still move even without its head. So long as she still had mana, the apostle wouldn't die instantly even after being decapitated. In fact, as long as her decapitated head could still see the area around her, losing it didn't dampen her combat capabilities at all.

She brandished her twin claymores, then launched a twin cross slash at Gahard, hoping to cut his head off in revenge.

"Whoa there!"

Gahard evaded the unbelievably fast attack with unbelievably fast reflexes. He even managed to launch a counterthrust.

"I've already been told that your core's somewhere around here, where your heart's supposed to be," Gahard said as he stabbed straight through the mana-supplying core of the apostle.

"As I suspected, all of your equipment is high-class ancient-magic-imbued artifacts," the apostle muttered.

That was indeed the case. The superdense plate armor everyone was wearing was imbued with a triple-layered Diamond Skin, Impact Absorption, Auto-Recovery, Stamina Recovery, and gravity magic that made it lighter. Their helmets were imbued with Riftwalk and Foresight, their greaves with Supersonic Step and Aerodynamic, and their gauntlets with Steel Arms. Furthermore, their weapons were all enchanted with spatial severing magic, the ability to convert mana into shock waves, and supersonic vibrations that also dispersed the target's mana.

This was also just one of the many blessings the monster of the abyss had granted to every single one of the over one hundred thousand soldiers of Tortus.

Gahard drew his sword out of the apostle's chest, and her body crumpled.

"All right. I, Gahard, have single-handedly slain one of the false god's apostles!"

He sent that message to the entire army in order to raise everyone's morale. He'd only taken down a single apostle, but that

small victory meant everything to the common soldiers. They burst out in cheers, and whatever lingering fear they might have still had vanished.

“Your Majesty, watch out!” one of the soldiers shouted. Out of the corner of his eye, Gahard saw a silver streak heading straight for him.

It seemed another apostle had launched a disintegration beam at him. The soldiers close to the beam’s point of origin had been knocked back, while the ones in the line of fire had managed to just barely jump out of the way with Supersonic Step.

However, Gahard himself didn’t have enough time to dodge. Just before the beam hit him, though, his core of handpicked elites jumped in front of him.

“Raise your shields!” Gahard shouted. Though, his men were already on it. The disintegration beam slammed into the triple-layered wall of shields.

In seconds, the shields were ground away into dust, but those few seconds were all the time Gahard and his men needed. The nearby soldiers took advantage of the delay to once again swarm the apostle.

“What a nuisance,” the apostle muttered.

Whatever arrogance the apostles had once had was gone now that the dead apostle had shared information with the rest. Now, they all knew that even a lowly foot soldier had weapons capable of killing them.

Now that their guards were up, the apostles were much, much harder to kill. They methodically tore through the soldiers, sending them flying and occasionally succeeding in chopping off their limbs.

“As we’ve told you time and time again, your struggles are in vain,” an apostle said as she kicked her way past Gahard’s retinue and charged straight at him. She then swung down at Gahard with such speed that he didn’t have time to dodge and was forced to block with his sword.

“Ngh, what’s with this insane power.”

The impact of the blow forced Gahard to his knees and caused the ground underneath him to cave in a little. His bones creaked painfully as they absorbed the shock of the apostle’s swing.

“Protect His Majesty!” his guards shouted. However, the apostle shot them all through the face with her feathers, killing them instantly.

“Behold. Your barrier is about to fall, and soon your vaunted fortress will as well.”

The only reason the apostle didn’t kill Gahard immediately was because she wanted to show him true despair first.

Indeed, as he looked up, Gahard saw that the Canopy had once again been destroyed. Though the disintegration barrage pounding

against it had only been half as strong this time, it simply hadn't been able to withstand long-term exposure to disintegration magic. All that had changed was that it had lasted a few minutes instead of a few seconds.

A concentrated downpour of disintegration beams shot toward the pope and his priests. A few dozen apostles also dived down and landed on the fortress's roof. But at the same time, Gahard saw the arrival of another trump card to turn the tables, so he smiled fearlessly.

"Hah, we won't go down that easily!"

Tired of his defiance, the apostle prepared to stab Gahard through the chest with her second claymore. But just before she could—

"Everyone! You can do iiiiiiit!"

A cute little girl's voice echoed through everyone's communicators, and the dozens of apostles on the fortress's roof were sent careening to the ground.

At their young master's behest, the seven many-legged golems stationed on and around the rooftop of the fortress sprang to life, their eyes gleaming with a deadly light.

After striking down the nearby apostles, Myu's friendly golems made a Power Rangers-style pose.

"The Demon Rangers are heeeeeeeeeereeeeeee!" Myu shouted through her communicator. Then, a small explosion appeared behind the seven posing golems.

People couldn't help but feel exasperated by the needlessly showy display, but the fact remained that it was the golems who'd knocked the apostles away with their localized gravity fields.

"Beat up the bad guys, Demon Rangers!" Myu shouted, and the golems flashed her a thumbs-up before springing into action.

Two of each of the golem's six arms transformed into Gatling guns, while another two turned into rail gun cannons and the last two were kept free to be used in close combat. Their stomach plates also slid back to reveal a massive rack of missile launchers.

They unloaded their full barrage on the apostles down below. Since there were no friendly forces nearby, they didn't have to worry about holding back. Furthermore, thanks to the golems' powerful gravitational fields, the apostles couldn't even run away.

Unsurprisingly, the fifty-odd apostles were ruthlessly blasted apart in a matter of seconds.

"Man, we were all hyped up to fight, but now we don't even have to," Atsushi moaned.

"Nagumo's way too overprotective of that daughter of his. I can't believe he gave her golems that are this dangerous," Noboru said.

“Also, what’s with that name? Is his naming sense that bad?” Akito added. They were still a little stunned by how handily the golems had torn through the apostles.

“They’re going to keep coming, so don’t let your guard down!” Yuka shouted, scolding her companions. With the exception of one area, everyone had managed to get their Orestes in place in time, so the apostles had once again been forced to retreat from their own disintegration barrage.

The one area in question was the fortress rooftop, which had been focused on by the enemies, but Kaori had simply nullified those disintegration beams with her own, and the few she hadn’t had been sent back at the apostles by David and the others flying up with their own smaller Orestes.

Upon seeing that, the apostles finally accepted that an aerial bombardment simply wouldn’t work. The detachment had been completely split up and was fighting a pitched melee with the soldiers on the ground.

Thanks to the difference in strength between the two sides, it was only a matter of time before the apostles broke through, but the mission they’d been tasked with was the thorough elimination of all mortal races.

“Things will take far too long at this rate.”

And so, the apostles decided to change tactics. Unfortunately, the forces of Tortus had predicted what exactly they would try next.

“The enemy will be coming from the east, west, and south as well now. All forces, prepare for combat! Kaori, Adul-dono, I hope you’re ready!” Liliana shouted.

“Yep!” Kaori replied.

“This is the moment I have been awaiting,” Adul said.

Liliana continued giving out orders to everyone, saying, “We’re moving into phase three, everyone! Good luck out there!”

“Thanks! All right, Yuka-chan, Sensei, everyone. See you soon!” Kaori exclaimed as she shot into the air with a boom, her black armor gleaming under the sun. She was taking the fight to the apostles in an attempt to keep them too occupied to attack the pope’s team down below.

“For five hundred years, we have endured your unjust persecution. I have not forgotten the massacre you ordered on our people for even a single day. Back then, we survivors swore that we would one day reclaim our honor and avenge our fallen comrades. My brethren, the time has finally come.”

Adul was normally so calm and gentle that his cold, rage-filled voice surprised everyone. But at the same time, it showed just how long the flames of resentment had been burning deep inside his heart.

“Show these emotionless dolls no mercy! Let Ehit feel the wrath of the dragonmen! It’s time to remind everyone who the true rulers of the skies are! Dragonmen...attack!”

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The dragonmen’s roars resounded throughout the battlefield. Like Adul, their rage had been building for five hundred years, and even those dragonmen who had been born after the massacre knew just how much their parents had suffered. As one they transformed, the various colors of their mana spiraling up into the sky.

For a brief moment, Liliana deactivated Grav Farenzen to let the three hundred dragonmen take flight. As they did so, they launched countless breath attacks into the sky.

It was truly a sight to behold. Five hundred years had passed since humans had last had contact with dragonmen, but they immediately understood why they’d been known as the rulers of the sky. The dragonmen’s breath attacks were so powerful that the apostles couldn’t just shrug them off.

Many of the apostles were killed outright by the dragonmen as they made their way to the eastern, western, and southern sections of the battlefield. The dragonmen, too, split up to aid their allies on all fronts, including the northern one where they were forced to fight on the ground due to the gravity field.

“Hah, looks like you guys are struggling to kill even one of us!” Gahard said, taunting the apostle.

“Disappear,” the apostle replied, unleashing yet another disintegration blast.

“Protect His Majesty!”

Once again, his guards formed up, desperately protecting their liege from the disintegration beam. However, the apostle launched a follow-up feather barrage, skewering them through the necks. As they collapsed to the ground, the beam made it to the soldiers they’d been protecting, who were vaporized in an instant.

“No matter how many artifacts you protect yourself with, no matter what tricks you use to take us out of the sky, at the end of the day, you are all human. None of you can hope to defeat us. Prostrate yourselves before us and accept our Lord’s judgment.”

Her words had an ominous ring to them, since the soldier’s emperor was currently being forced to kneel in front of the apostle. But even so, the brave warriors of the empire didn’t falter. They were far too busy trying to figure out how to defeat the enemy in front of them to feel even an ounce of despair.

“Don’t underestimate the soldiers of the empire,” Gahard said as he watched one young soldier charge forward, using the corpses of his

allies as shields to cover his advance. He'd lost one arm and was bleeding profusely from the various gashes in his armor. His wounds were almost certainly fatal. And yet, his determination was unyielding. Grinning even as blood dripped from his mouth, he swung down at the apostle with his sword.

Barely sparing him a glance, the apostle fired a feather at him to finish him off.

"Limit Breaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak!"

"What?!"

The young soldier's mana ballooned, and he sped up immensely, dodging the feather with ease. The apostle was completely stunned by his action. Limit Break was the kind of skill only an Irregular like Hajime and his companions, or a bona fide hero like Kouki, could use. So unbelievable was this situation that the apostle's reaction to the soldier's attack was momentarily delayed.

Realizing it was too late to dodge, the apostle hurriedly blocked with her claymore.

"How are you able to use that skill...?" she muttered.

"Well done, youngster," Gahard said, purposely relaxing his muscles. By the time the apostle realized what he was doing, it was too late. With one less sword bearing down on Gahard, he was able to redirect the force of the swing and parry it to the side. Once he was free, he too intoned, "Limit—"

"No, this can't be!"

"—breaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak!"

Like the young soldier, Gahard's stats tripled. He slashed at the apostle with far more ferocity than before.

"That glow—"

The apostle barely managed to circle away from the slash aimed at her core, but then Gahard's follow-up thrust found its mark. She was so surprised that she cut off midsentence.

As mana leaked out of the apostle at a prodigious rate, Gahard held up the red-jeweled necklace he was wearing with his free hand.

"This is a battle to decide the fate of humanity. We wouldn't stand a chance if we weren't able to transcend our limits, now would we?"

As he pulled his sword out of the apostle's body he activated his communicator and shouted, "To all the brave souls of the imperial army!"

There was no longer any need to pay any heed to the dying apostle. It was time to give the signal. In truth, all of the soldiers had been using a weakened version of Limit Break from the very start of the fight, but it had taken some time for their bodies to get used to it. Not everyone even had managed to get used to it, but with the strength everyone had now, they couldn't hold a candle to the

apostles.

And so, even though it carried the risk of permanently damaging everyone's souls, and guaranteed that once their time limit was up everyone would be too exhausted to fight, the combined forces of Tortus had no other choice. In the same way that the young soldier had risked his life to achieve a miracle, the time had come for every soldier to give their all. Dying without having unleashed their full power was the greatest dishonor a warrior could bear, after all. Thus, Gahard gave a simple command.

“Transcend your limits and fight! Squeeze out every last ounce of strength and sacrifice everything for victory!”

The initial plan had been for everyone to Limit Break much later than this, but Gahard's speech had brought everyone's morale to a fever pitch.

“Limit Break!”

To the east, Kuzeli and her knights activated their Limit Breaks.

“Limit Break!”

Lanzwi and his personal troops did the same to the west.

“Sheesh, think about how much stress this is putting on my old bones... Limit Break.”

Even Ulfric, who shouldn't even have possessed any mana, was able to use Limit Break.

“It’s finally time. Let’s do this, guys... Limit Break!” Yuka said, glaring at the apostles rushing toward her.

With most of Tortus's forces occupied, the concentrated barrage on the apostles in the air had weakened somewhat, allowing more of them to make it down to the fort. Fortunately, everyone was ready to meet them.

“Limit Break!” Atsushi, Noboru, Akito, Nana, Taeko, Jugo, Kentarou, Kousuke, Mao, Ayako, Shinji, and Yoshiki said in unison.

All of the soldiers in Heiligh's army, Ankaji's army, Gahard's army, Verbergen's army, all of the dragonmen, and all of the adventurers also cast their Limit Breaks.

[illegible]

[illegible]

This was the last, and greatest, trump card Hajime had left behind for the mortal races of Tortus. A Limit Break for literally everyone. And not just a regular limit break, but a Limit Break with a stat increase on par with Overload. And it was all thanks to the spirit magic artifact he'd created, Last Seele.

Of course, the damage caused by forcibly strengthening one's soul like this would have killed half the people who tried to use the artifact had it not been for the fact that their bodies had all been enhanced by Hajime's CheatMates, and their souls were constantly being strengthened and repaired by Aiko's spirit magic.

In fact, Aiko was currently panicking because everyone had activated their Limit Breaks early. She clutched the rosary-shaped artifact Hajime had given her close to her chest and started casting as fast as she could. In that moment, she looked more like a praying saint than a goddess.

Aiko's light-pink mana pulsed across the battlefield, and she stabilized the souls of everyone who'd activated their Last Seele, keeping them from killing themselves with their own Limit Breaks.

When Gahard and the others had first heard Hajime's plan of splitting up the enemy apostles, forcing them to fight on the ground, weakening them as much as possible, and then using a power-up so dangerous it risked becoming a double-edged sword, they'd looked at him like he was crazy. But in the end, this was how far they'd had to

go just to be able to fight on even footing with the apostles.

Looking at it another way, that meant all of Hajime's plans were only enough to give humanity a fighting chance; what happened after this was up to their own efforts.

However, that was more than enough for Gahard. He leveled his sword at another apostle and shouted, "Don't underestimate humanity!"

The apostle blinked in surprise. It was almost as if she'd heard those exact same words long ago.

Chapter II: Everyone's Battlefields

To the east, a group of apostles had made it past the barrage of bullets and dragonfire and reached Heiligh's army.

"They sure adapt quickly," Kuzeli said, narrowing her eyes at the incoming apostles. As the captain of Heiligh's knights, she'd been put in charge of the kingdom's entire army for this battle.

The enemy had split up ahead of time, knowing that once they came under the effects of the gravity field they'd be split up anyway, which had allowed them to dodge more of the barrage from the walls by forcing the gunners to split their fire. Moreover, they were flying just barely above the heads of the soldiers, making it difficult for the gunners to aim.

The snipers could still shoot a few down, of course, but it made using rockets and missiles much harder without causing collateral damage.

The apostles were also raining feathers and disintegration beams on the soldiers below as they flew over, forcing them to stay on the defensive. And while most soldiers were able to dodge out of the way or take cover behind shields, there were still many who were turned to dust without even getting a chance to cross swords with their foes.

Gritting her teeth at the pain of their loss, Kuzeli shouted, "We are the protectors of the kingdom! The defenders of the weak! Knights, soldiers, to arms!"

The brave warriors of the kingdom replied with a resounding cheer. And a second later, the apostles crashed down all over the battlefield.

As always, all of the apostles were sharing information in real time, so they knew that at least a few hundred of their number had been killed instantly by the various traps the different armies had prepared at each of their respective battlefields.

Allowing mere *mortals* to slay so many of them was unforgivable, so they once again changed tactics. Their overwhelming might wasn't the only thing that made apostles so deadly after all.

"Our Lord's will is absolute," one of them said as a young soldier charged at her. Then, there was a flash of silver light as the apostle swung her claymore horizontally, cutting the soldier clean in half. After that, she slashed diagonally behind her with her second claymore, decapitating another soldier that had been trying to sneak

up behind her.

Using her feathers to push back the swarm of soldiers charging at her, she slowly started advancing on the fortress. She blew away anyone in her path with disintegration magic and blocked all incoming spells with her wings.

"I've got you now!" one of the knights shouted as he closed in on her. Two soldiers were clinging desperately onto her claymores to keep her from using them, despite the fact that doing so was eroding their own bodies.

However, once again, the apostle quickly adapted to the situation by letting go of her weapons and rushing the knight. Due to how close she'd gotten, the knight's swing only had enough power to cut into her shoulder rather than slicing straight through her. Meanwhile, the apostle wreathed her hand in disintegration magic and sliced the knight's head off. At the same time, she delivered a roundhouse kick to another soldier, breaking his arm, and leaped over the low sweep of a third soldier that had come in from behind. She then swept her wings around in an arc, cutting through the next wave of soldiers that approached her.

Hovering just a few centimeters off the ground, the apostle flew over to where her claymores were and retrieved them. A few soldiers managed to land glancing blows on her, but she paid the scratches no mind and mercilessly counterattacked.

Now that the apostle could no longer rely on her overbearing stats, she was forced to use the same martial arts that humans had devised to eke out victory while her body was slowly worn down with numerous cunts. Normally, she would never stoop to such a lowly method of fighting, but circumstances had forced her to use every tool at her disposal to win. Her comrades in the Sanctuary had all been one-sidedly slaughtered, and even the situation on Tortus was beginning to look dire. The apostles could no longer afford the luxury of leisurely plunging the mortal races into despair before killing them.

"Goddammit, these winged bitches are too strong! This is our second Limit Break and we're still getting pushed around!"

"Die, you fucking monster!"

Despite all the debuffs they'd stacked on the apostles and all the buffs they'd piled upon themselves, the apostles still had three to four times as high stats as the average human. The gap between them was just that big.

Initially, the soldiers had thought it had at least been narrowed enough that their numbers would give them an advantage. However, after fighting an apostle firsthand, they were beginning to realize they'd underestimated their strength. They were hearing far more screams of pain than they were cheers of victory from their comrades

on the neighboring battlefields. Thus, the soldiers started cursing more and more frequently, trying their best to tamp down on the fear that was once again welling up within them.

“Don’t falter!”

Suddenly, a loud voice echoed across the battlefield and the beautiful knight commander leaped in to engage the apostle. Most people hadn’t gotten used to the artifact boots enchanted with Aerodynamic that Hajime had issued them, but she executed such a masterfully fluid somersault with them that it was hard to believe she’d only been using them for a day. The apostle glared at Kuzeli, but then a series of chains wrapped around her arms while blades of light stabbed her body.

“Now, Captain!” Kuzeli’s vice-captain, Komord, shouted. He and a small band of knights had cast all the restraining magic they could. Normally, that wouldn’t do a thing to an apostle, but with the gap in their stats much lower, it was enough to hold her for a few seconds.

“Haaaaaah!”

With a spirited battle cry, Kuzeli thrust at the apostle’s chest. As someone who’d served in the royal guard for decades, Kuzeli had trained extensively for indoor fighting, so her thrust was her strongest skill by far, and it was due to the accuracy and speed of them that she’d managed to work her way up the ranks. With her stats now significantly buffed, her thrust was fast enough to be mistaken for a beam of light.

“Agh!”

“This is payback for last time,” Kuzeli said as her rapier pierced the apostle’s core. And as she pulled her rapier back out she used one of her artifacts to amplify her voice and shout, “Hold fast, men! Remember who we’re fighting to protect!”

Everyone here knew that if they fell here their family, their friends, and their loved ones would be killed. All of the citizens of the kingdom who’d been evacuated were fervently praying for the knights’ victory.

“Imagine what atrocities will be visited upon them if we’re defeated here!”

The soldiers were far more afraid of losing their loved ones than they were of Ehit’s terrifying monsters. But Kuzeli’s words didn’t just remind them of what their true fear was; it also stoked the fires of their rage.

“Hold fast until the very end for the sake of their future!”

“For the future!”

Kuzeli’s speech, combined with the fact that she’d just killed an apostle, succeeded in rallying the soldiers. They threw themselves at the remaining apostles with more ferocity than ever before.

“That was a splendid speech, Kuzeli. The seventh legion needs your help though; they’re being overwhelmed by a team of three apostles.”

“As you command, Your Highness!” Kuzeli exclaimed as she immediately dashed off toward her next battlefield, barking out orders as she went. She gripped her rapier tight, thinking back to when an apostle had invaded the royal palace. By the time Kuzeli had reached the battlefield, the students had all been defeated and she and her knights had been unable to do a single thing. They hadn’t even been able to stop Liliana from going with the apostle when commanded to.

Of course, Liliana herself had forbidden them from engaging, but that was because she had known Kuzeli and the others had lacked the strength to change the situation. It was humiliating. Kuzeli could do nothing but watch helplessly as the charge she’d sworn to give her life to protect was effectively kidnapped.

When Liliana had safely returned, Kuzeli had been equal parts relieved and ashamed. But now she’d been given a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make up for her failure by a man everyone agreed was more of a Demon Lord than the real Demon Lord. Killing one apostle had been payback for abducting her liege, sure, but that wasn’t enough. From here on out, it was time for the kingdom’s royal knights to prove that they had what it took to protect the people.

“Never again will I allow any one of you to approach the princess,” Kuzeli said as she bounded across the battlefield, using her Aerodynamic boots to leap over the heads of her soldiers. But as she drew close to her destination—“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Whoa!”

She heard what could only be described as a cutesy roar, which made her stop in her tracks. Komord and the others halted as well, stunned. All of the nearby soldiers looked just as shocked too. Considering what was happening in front of them, it was hardly surprising. A completely different kind of monster was dominating this battlefield.

“Hmph! Despite your pretty faces, you’re quite the rambunctious tomboys.”

Standing alone against the apostles was a giant of a figure with muscles that bulged through their armor. Steam was rising off their entire body, and their eyes emitted a feral gleam through their helmet’s thin visor. At the same time, though, their hair—which came out of a small hole in their helmet—was bound into three pigtails with a cute bow on each. On the ground in front of them was a single apostle with her chest caved in and her limbs bent at odd angles.

The figure was radiating an intense amount of bloodlust, but at the same time, they seemed to be trying their best to look cute. It was

utterly baffling.

“All right, who wants to feel my burning pathos next?!” they said with a terrifying wink.

“Eek, I’m sorry!” one of the soldiers said, bowing down with tears in his eyes even though the figure had directed their wink at the apostles and not him. Honestly though, the other soldiers understood how he felt. The giant’s overwhelming presence was powerful enough to make even the apostles hesitate.

The two of them that remained involuntarily took a few steps back.

In fact, they looked even warier than they had when facing down Hajime. Unfortunately, their fear blinded them to the fact that two other giants had already managed to circle behind them.

“Caught youuuuuu!”

The two apostles turned around in horror. Both of them were being held by arms thick enough to squeeze them to a pulp. Of course, these three giants were the same superhuman beings Hajime had encountered long ago in the city of Brooke. Crystabel and their beloved disciples. All of them possessed inhuman strength and were capable of crushing even the sturdy apostles with their arms.

The two apostles hurriedly wreathed their bodies in disintegration magic, hoping to turn the two giants into dust before they were crushed. The armor the giants were wearing was quite tough, and it would be a close race to see whether the armor gave out first, or the apostles did.

Unfortunately for the apostles, however, the giants’ magic had won out.

“Ah!”

“Stripping us in public? How bold of you!”

“I like feisty girls, but you know—”

The two giants pressed the apostles’ faces into their sweaty chests. A second later, there was a horrendous crunching noise and the disintegration magic enveloping the apostles vanished. Then, the apostles’ backs snapped as well.

“Uryaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Finally, the two giants suplexed the apostles, smashing their broken faces into the ground. Their necks snapped, and though they fired a barrage of feathers from their wings in the hopes of taking the giants down with them, they only managed to cut skin. Smiling, the bleeding giants stabbed through the apostles’ chests with their hands. They were wearing spatial-rending gauntlets that Hajime had made for the more close-combat-oriented fighters. They then ripped out the apostles’ cores and crushed them in their fists.

As they let out ferocious war cries, Crystabel walked over and

finished the sentence they'd started before killing the apostles.

"We don't much like playing with dolls," they said with another playful wink. They then looked up at another apostle that was trying to fly right past them and reach the fortress.

"Ngh, to think there would be other Irregulars left here..."

The apostle could have kept flying, but instead, she touched down and readied herself to face Crystabel. She held her twin claymores in a cross in front of her—a stance Kuzeli had never seen before.

Incidentally, there were more of Crystabel's disciples scattered among the adventurer groups, and all of them were making just as big an impact on the battlefield.

And of course, since the apostles all shared information, they were seeing in vivid detail the gruesome fates their comrades were meeting at the giants' hands. Indeed, the reason this apostle was taking such a defensive stance was because she'd seen what happened to anyone who got caught by Crystabel and their disciples.

"Shall we dance, little doll? I haven't had my fill of hugs yet," Crystabel proclaimed as they spread their arms wide and slowly advanced toward the apostle.

Seeing that, Kuzeli activated her communicator and said, "Y-Your Highness! The seventh legion is doing just fine! Is there anywhere else that needs my assistance?"

"Oh, yes!"

It was clear she wasn't needed here.

Meanwhile, on the western front, the forces of Ankaji were fighting valiantly.

"Fight on, brave warriors of the desert! We're living in a historical moment! Every warrior who fights today will go down in legend! It's time to make a name for ourselves, men!" Lanzwi Feuward Zengen shouted, his voice amplified by the artifact hanging from his neck.

Considering the fact that this was a battle for the fate of the world, it wouldn't be too surprising if future generations saw this as history's biggest moment. And naturally, that would make those participating in it all legends.

Knowing that they were living such a legendary moment did wonders for the soldiers' morale. But sadly, morale alone wasn't enough to win a battle. Ankaji's soldiers were faring especially badly because they were used to fighting on loose, shifting sand rather than hard ground.

Normally, it wouldn't be that much of a problem, since they were disciplined enough to take on monsters and demons in almost any terrain, but apostles were a different matter. They were strong enough that even the smallest lapse in judgment would see a person instantly

dead.

“Lanzwi-sama, we’re being pushed back!”

“The left wing’s taken serious casualties!”

“Guess those youngsters who’ve never left Gruen can’t take the heat,” Lanzwi said, gritting his teeth.

Looking around, he saw his men being tossed around like toys all over the battlefield. Every now and then he heard a few cheers signaling the death of an apostle, but on the whole, his men were losing a lot more than they were winning.

“The other armies are doing their best out there. We’d be the laughingstock of the world if only our western flank was defeated.”

Lanzwi saw this battle as a chance to repay Hajime and his friends for saving his dukedom from the plague. Most of his men felt the same way and the younger members of his army especially were enamored with Kaori, who’d pushed herself to her limits healing everyone. In fact, his son was so obsessed with Kaori that he’d created a unit dedicated to serving her.

Regardless, Lanzwi had wanted to protect this place that Hajime had left in his and everyone else’s care, but that was proving harder than expected.

“This is no time to be worrying about my pride,” Lanzwi said with a shake of his head. “Contact central command and tell them we need reinforce—”

“There’s no need for that.”

An emotionless woman’s voice rang through everyone’s mind.

“Huh?!”

“Oh no! Shield bearers, protect the duke!”

A second later, an apostle blew past a knot of soldiers and appeared before Lanzwi. She had only one arm, and it was clear she’d pushed herself extremely hard to reach Lanzwi.

Lanzwi dropped into a fighting stance while his adjutant barked out commands. The apostle pointed her claymore at Lanzwi, silver light gathering around it.

“That’s one down,” a gruff voice said.

“Huh?” the apostle said in confusion as her head flew through the air.

A dull crimson blade was jutting out of the headless apostle’s chest, right through where her core was. And as the blade was pulled out a spray of blood filled the air.

Lanzwi’s savior appeared from behind that veil of crimson. It was a man wearing black clothes that covered everything up to his mouth and a pair of black sunglasses. Two fluffy bunny ears sprouted from his head.

“Your accursed blood is as filthy as this rotten world...” he

muttered as he wiped his blade clean, then adjusted his sunglasses with his middle finger. Judging by the way the mask around his mouth shifted, he was probably trying to make an edgy smile. It was obvious from the way that he carried himself that he thought he looked super cool right now.

There was, of course, only one person this could be.

“Rejoice, apostle, for you have been bested by Cambantis Elfalight Rodelia Haulia, hunter of the unknowable abyss.”

Cam. The leader of the Haulia tribe, Cam Haulia. While everyone looked at him in complete shock, another apostle closed in on the group. But of course, the other members of the Haulia tribe had already spread out over this battlefield. They moved like silent shadows, imperceptible to friend and foe alike.

One of them jumped off the head of one of Lanzwi’s men to get directly above the low-flying apostle. She landed gracefully on the apostle’s back and stabbed through her core in one smooth motion. And at the same time, she cut off the apostle’s head for good measure. She then rode the falling apostle’s body to the ground like a surfboard and landed right in front of Lanzwi.

“Are you apostles still able to say everything is going according to your ‘Lord’s’ plan? Because we sure are. Of course, unlike you, our boss is the greatest man in the world.”

The newcomer took off her sunglasses and gave the apostle’s corpse a disparaging look. She then turned back to Lanzwi and the others, who flinched.

“Neaschtratum the Butcher, here to assist you on our boss’s orders.”

Grinning, she put her sunglasses back on and turned to look back toward the fighting. Nea—who was still ten—would never make an elementary mistake like letting her guard down after all.

Very soon, more and more of the apostles started losing their heads all over the battlefield. Cam and the other Haulia were taking advantage of the packed crowd to assassinate all of the apostles on this battlefield. Their beloved boss had put them through hellish training to master their presence-hiding abilities, and on top of that, he’d also given them all tailor-made artifacts to help them with their stealth even more. Their efforts were more than enough to stabilize the situation, but Lanzwi couldn’t bring himself to rejoice.

“My apologies. It seems my beloved Julia is more starved for blood than ever,” one of the middle-aged Haulia said, lovingly stroking his shortsword.

“This is your fault for bringing out the murderer within. I tried so hard to hold her back, but you just wouldn’t quit...” another young Haulia woman in her midtwenties said as she covered one eye with a

sad smile.

Her teenage sister struck an extremely chuuni pose next to her and muttered in a deep voice, "This is the will of the stars. I am simply abiding by it."

The two of them were standing over the corpses of their butchered prey.

"Ngh, it's rampaging out of control again! Calm yourself, my unruly left arm!" a group of Haulia said, clutching their arms at the same time.

These Haulia were just too scary. In a way, they were scarier monsters than the apostles they were killing.

Once they were done with their respective opponents, the Haulia all exchanged glances and nodded satisfactorily to each other. For everyone else, this battlefield was a desperate struggle just to survive, but to the Haulia it was just another hunting ground. There was nothing more terrifying than the unknown, and right now, the Haulia were the most terrifying unknown of all to Lanzwi and the other soldiers.

Surprisingly, even the apostles looked a bit irked at how the Haulia seemed to be almost toying with them. Thus, they quickly decided to prioritize taking out the Haulia before everyone else.

The problem was, Cam and the others could effortlessly slip into the crowd and vanish from sight. The moment any Haulia noticed they were being marked, they immediately hid their presence.

"I won't let you escape, rabbitman," one of the apostles said, dashing toward where she'd last spotted her quarry. Of course, the soldiers in her path tried to bar her way. And as a result, the apostle completely lost track of the Haulia she'd been chasing.

Of course, the moment the apostle shifted her attention to deal with the threat right in front of her, the Haulia reappeared and assassinated the apostle in one clean blow.

"I've sent reinforcements your way, Duke Zengen," Liliana said through the communicator. "They're rabbitmen, but I promise you they'll be effective. I've seen with my own eyes what they can do, so —"

"Oh, don't worry I'm seeing it right now too."

"I-I see... Well, in that case, good luck!"

An awkward silence hung in the air. Lanzwi still didn't know what to make of the newcomers, but as king of the dunes, he had a job to do.

"We can't let our brave allies from the far east take all the credit! Brave warriors of the desert, follow me!"

He personally led the charge toward another apostle in an attempt to shake off his feelings of inadequacy.

Thanks to his and the Haulias' efforts, they were able to start pushing the apostles back once more.

To the south, where the forces of Verbergen were gathered, was perhaps the strangest battlefield out of the four. The whole area behind the fortress was covered in trees. One hundred meters out from the fortress, a dense forest stretched out for a kilometer in all directions. The whole place had been flat plains a few minutes ago, but now a perfectly square forest had popped up. The trees made navigation quite difficult for the apostles, who were now bereft of flight.

On the other hand, this sea of trees was the perfect terrain for the beastmen who made up the backbone of the southern army.

“Shaaaaaa!”

They effectively made use of the trees as shields and footholds, attacking the apostles from unexpected directions and taking cover whenever things looked dicey. One of them honed in on an apostle with blistering speed, and she was forced to block the leopardman's slash with her claymore because she didn't have the time to blow her opponent away with a disintegration attack. The artifact sword the leopardman was wielding started eating into the apostle's claymore and she was forced to push him back before her sword was destroyed. But the moment he was forced back, the leopardman jumped into the tree branches and quickly vanished from sight.

A second later, a bearman charged at her from the opposite side.

“Oraaaaaaaaaah!”

She blocked his halberd with her claymore, but bearman were known for their monstrous strength, so the force of the blow caused the apostle's knees to buckle and her arms to tremble. She let out a surprised gasp, but nevertheless deftly parried the halberd blow and kicked the bearman away. However, his natural sturdiness and the protection granted to him by his armor meant the kick barely even winded him.

They're using the terrain to their advantage and using mostly surprise attacks... It's a simple strategy, but an effective one.

Though they possessed no mana, beastmen had exceptional physical abilities. And since apostles boasted extreme natural resistance to most elemental magic, their lack of mana wasn't really a problem here, and their physical strengths helped them get in close with Hajime's artifacts, so they were actually better suited to this battle than humans.

“If the forest is the problem, then I simply need to eliminate it.”

The apostle wrapped her wings around herself for defense, then started charging an exceptionally powerful disintegration attack. Even

with her stats weakened, her strongest disintegration attack would be enough to blow away the nearby forest at least.

“A big one’s coming! Evasive action, men! Shield bearers forward!” Regin, the bearman, shouted. He was, of course, the same bearman who had picked a fight with the Haulia and been so traumatized that he needed soothing medication every night or he had nightmares.

The trees began to creak and groan as the apostle completed her charge, and Regin hurriedly ran to find cover. He eventually found a group of dwarven shield bearers and ducked behind them.

A second later, the apostle spread her wings and—the moment she did—something hit her.

“Agh...you were waiting for this moment?”

A silver arrow was sticking out of her chest, right where her core was. The apostle desperately looked around to try and locate the sniper, but she couldn’t find them.

Of course, that was because the sniper was a good four hundred meters away in a completely different part of the forest. It was the old elven clan leader, Ulfric Heipyst. He was wearing only light armor that covered his vitals, as he was constantly on the move. He kept changing locations and waiting until an apostle focused purely on offense to take advantage of that opening and snipe them. He also had a pair of artifact goggles that greatly enhanced his perceptive abilities, and the bow he was using had such a massive draw weight that he couldn’t even fire it without the double Limit Break he was under.

However, while these two artifacts were definitely helping him out, his own skills were nothing to scoff at. Though all the other archers were also using similar equipment, they certainly wouldn’t have been able to pull off the kind of shots he was.

There was a reason he’d been granted the title of Godbow, a realm that only a few elves in all of history had ever reached.

“That’s one...no, two down,” Ulfric said as he spotted another opportunity to snipe an apostle.

“Well done, Ulfric-sama. There’s another three invading from your five o’clock. I’ll chase them down for you.”

“My thanks, General Gil.”

Gil, who had been promoted to general thanks to his connection with Hajime, ran off to hunt down the newcomers.

Maybe it would have been better for Ulfric-sama to be our commander after all?

Gil couldn’t help but feel he wasn’t suited to the role. Of course, Ulfric had refused the role because he said he’d wanted to focus on his sniping, but he seemed to be picking them out from miles away even as he was relaying orders and coordinating his archers.

Suddenly, one of the apostle's disintegration blasts went off. Not everyone could successfully snipe them the moment they swapped to offense the way Ulfric could, so the blast obliterated the trees in a fan shape around the apostle and a few beastmen who hadn't been able to get to safety in time were turned to dust.

Those left in what was now a large clearing warily prepared for the apostle's follow-up attack. They were still capable of fighting just fine on an open field, but having their preferred terrain stripped away from them left many of them looking nervous. Luckily, however, since this entire forest was man-made, it could, of course, be made again.

Behind the chanting priests on the fortress's rooftop stood a small figure. They were looking over the entire southern battlefield.

"No matter how many times you destroy it, I'll just bring it back—Forest Creation!"

The caster was none other than Aiko Hatayama, the same woman who was also making sure everyone's souls stayed safe during their Limit Break.

The rosario artifact she had automatically took care of the spirit magic, so she actually did have some leeway to do other things, which was exactly why she was taking advantage of her newest spell, Forest Creation.

She had spread a massive amount of seeds on the southern battlefield beforehand, and the new artifact Hajime had given her, combined with the skills of her job, Farmer, allowed her to make those seeds sprout and grow almost instantaneously. Thus, the area that had been deforested by the apostle's disintegration blast was once again covered in foliage.

Realizing they wouldn't be able to demolish the forest, the apostles started leaping up the trees to try to take a shot at Aiko. Unfortunately, they were playing right into her hands.

The jewel in Aiko's hand began to glow and the Hyperions Hajime gave her floated over to her. She lowered them a little and started firing fully horizontal laser blasts at the apostles.

It was clear she took her job of guarding everyone's backs seriously.

"All right, everything's finally ready."

It had taken her some time, but she'd finally managed to prepare her ultimate trump card as well.

"I command you in the name of Aiko Hatayama! Fleeting, ethereal lives, rise once more to smite your foes! Soul Possession!"

Streaks of pink light scattered across the battlefield like a meteor shower. They rained down on all of the fallen apostles in the forest, and a second later, the apostles whose shattered cores should have rendered them inert rose to their feet and started attacking their

comrades.

Soul Possession was a spirit magic spell that created lesser copies of the caster's soul which were then used to take over and manipulate corpses. The spell only worked on golems and dead creatures, and it functioned very differently from Eri Nakamura's form of necromancy, which involved binding the spirits of the dead to their bodies.

Still, it wasn't a very noble spell to use. As a responsible adult who took her role as a teacher seriously, Aiko knew this wasn't the kind of example she wanted to set for her children. However, since she was capable of using spells like this, she couldn't afford to hold back in a battle this dangerous.

If using these despicable abilities was what it took to keep her students alive, then Aiko would gladly bear that dishonor. She couldn't bear to see her students being the only ones making sacrifices for this fight, after all. That being said, it wasn't just her pride as a teacher that was driving her to go this far.

"I have to defend this spot until Nagumo-san returns!"

There was also the selfish desire to have Hajime commend her, even if she knew her feelings for him would never be requited.

Unsurprisingly, the other students heard her resolute declaration.

"Ha ha ha, Ai-chan isn't even pretending to hide her feelings anymore, is she?"

"Shizuku-chan and Lily both fell for him too. And there's also..."

Mao and Ayako both glanced over their shoulder to look at Yuka. She was barking out orders, completely oblivious to her two friends' gazes. For all that Yuka tried to deny it, they both knew she was down bad for Hajime.

"There are a few other girls who look like they might fall for him too."

"Yeah, some of them use 'sama' when they say his name, or say they want to be his pet."

"I can't believe the guy actually got himself a harem. No wonder everyone calls him a Demon Lord."

"Enough chatting, you two! They're coming!" Kentarou said in an exasperated voice.

Naturally, the two of them hadn't actually lapsed in concentration while they'd been talking. But since they were both part of the support crew, there wasn't much to do until the enemy got here, and they'd been chatting to help alleviate their nervousness. Now, though, the apostles were coming, and they immediately sprang into action.

Mao Yoshino's job was Rejuvenist, and the artifact Hajime had given her was a small shape-shifting round shield. The center of the circle spun around like a roulette with a different spell imbued into each slice. Mao could choose which spell she wanted it to be on at any

given time and amplify it significantly with her job's natural talents.

"Heaven's Raiment. Amplifier. Earth Rise."

Mao created a barrier of light around Verbergen's soldiers, as well as Jugo, who was fighting down below, and also gave them yet another stat boost. At the same time, she also gave Kentarou's earth magic an upgrade.

A second later, a few dozen apostles broke through the forest and unleashed a storm of disintegration feathers at the fort.

"Hallowed Ground!"

Since Ayako's job was Healer, she wasn't too versed in barrier magic, but the white metal wand that Hajime had given her helped raise her affinity for it in addition to amplifying her healing prowess. The barrier weakened the barrage significantly and gave the regular soldiers time to form up with their shields.

By the time the feathers broke through Ayako's Hallowed Ground, the soldiers had created a shield wall, so barely any of the feathers caused any damage. Of course, there were a few people who got injured here and there, but Ayako was able to take care of that as well.

"Divine Benison!"

With an incantation only as long as the spell name, Ayako cast one of the strongest wide-area healing spells there was. The apostles swiftly turned to Mao and Ayako, causing the two of them to flinch.

"Don't worry, Tsuji-san. We're going to win this. Our leader said so, remember?" Kentarou said, waving around a similar white wand to Ayako's.

"Nomura-kun... Yeah, you're right!"

Her confidence restored, Ayako went back to focusing on her own job.

"Is it just me, or are you two flirting in the middle of battle?" Mao asked in a suspicious voice.

"N-No way!" the two of them said in unison, prompting Mao to sigh and wave her hand dismissively. She knew the two of them clearly had feelings for each other, but while they were brave enough to face an army of apostles, it seemed they lacked the courage to confess to each other.

Meanwhile, the Canopy shattered for the third time, and while Kaori and the dragons were trying to keep the airborne apostles engaged, they couldn't stop all of them, so at least a few zipped past and landed on the fortress roof.

Mao and Ayako could feel Yuka tense up behind them.

"Looks like they've finally reached us. Ha ha, I was hoping we'd get to take it easy, but I guess not," Mao said, trying to sound cavalier.

Determined to protect everyone just as much as Aiko had, Mao

cast even more support magic on her allies down below, as well as her comrades who were fighting on the rooftop.

Jugo and friends were also fighting fiercely on the southern battlefield, determined to prevent even a single apostle from getting past them and reaching the fortress.

“Uoooooooooooooh!”

A nearby wolfman warrior had given his life to distract an apostle for a split second, and Jugo took advantage of that opportunity to ram into her. With all the armor he was wearing, he was able to slam into her with the force of a dump truck. However, while the tackle carried the apostle a good few meters back, she managed to remain on her feet.

As soon as she regained her balance, she tried to counter with a point-blank disintegration beam.

“Hiyaaah!”

“Ah!”

But before she could, Jugo lifted her and threw her. It all happened so fast that the apostle didn’t even have time to use her wings to keep herself airborne, and she hit the ground hard. Jugo’s technique was flawless, but more importantly, his power was immense.

Cracks spread out from where the apostle hit the ground, and a small crater formed underneath her. Jugo then followed up by slamming his gauntlet’s elbow spike into the apostle’s face and breaking her arm with his free hand.

Jugo had been a skilled judo practitioner even back on Earth, but now he’d learned to apply those techniques in combat and made them far more deadly.

“Out of the way,” the apostle said impassively. As she felt no pain, the only real inconvenience these attacks had caused was limiting her mobility. Then, with her unbroken arm, the apostle launched a disintegration beam at Jugo’s armpit, where his armor was the thinnest.

Normally, an attack like that would have blown his arm off. But Jugo’s Job was Heavy Knight. Among the melee-oriented jobs it was lacking in firepower, but it boasted the strongest defensive abilities.

“You won’t get me that easily!” Jugo shouted, and the apostle let out a small gasp of surprise. Though her beam had destroyed his armor, his arm was still intact and wreathed in a solid layer of his mana.

He’d used multiple layers of Diamond Skin. Ryutarou was capable of that feat as well, but his Diamond Skins weren’t as strong as Jugo’s, especially now that Jugo had been given an artifact that specifically

boosted his defensive powers. With her stats reduced by a full sixty percent, the apostle would need nearly a minute to burn through Jugo's Diamond Skins with her disintegration beam.

Naturally, that was more than enough time for Jugo to activate the mini pile bunker attached to his gauntlet and punch the apostle's unguarded chest.

"We're not gonna lose this time!"

There was a sharp hiss as the mini pile bunker shot its stake through the apostle's core, pulverizing it. The apostle then spasmed once...and went limp.

The normally quiet Jugo let out a roar of triumph. The stake from his mini pile bunker retracted and started charging for another shot.

Just then, a nearby catman warrior shouted out a warning to him. He turned around and saw another apostle coming at him from behind. Before she could even swing her claymore down at him, though, she was assassinated.

"Gah... Not you again."

"This is the second time I've been able to sneak up behind one of you!"

The apostle couldn't believe she'd forgotten to keep an eye out for her assailant, even though she'd known he had the same dangerous ability to hide his presence just like the Haulia.

Wait...I forgot? How is that possible?

She looked down in disbelief as Kousuke pulled his black shortsword out of her chest. His weapons and fighting style resembled the Haulia's quite closely, but his stealth skills were on a whole different level compared to the Haulia.

As she fell to the ground, the apostle stared as intently as she could at the space behind her, but she still couldn't make out her assailant's features.

How can I not even recognize him?!

She *knew* he was right there. She could see him. And yet, his features looked blurry to her eyes. In fact, even though she was looking at him, she kept forgetting he was there. It was as if his entire existence was being censored from her mind.

"Thanks for the save, Kousuke. Sorry if I'm talking to thin air. I can't tell exactly where you are."

"I'm right in front of you, idiot."

Kousuke's job was Assassin. Perfect for the boy who'd always been hard to spot, even back on Earth. After coming to Tortus though, his skills had undergone one hell of a transformation. If he got serious about keeping himself hidden, people would forget he was even after them, making it even easier to sneak up on them. In the same way people paid no special attention to the weeds and pebbles on the

roadside, those that saw him wouldn't register him as anything more than part of the background. Unless they were as powerful as an apostle, Kousuke could hold a dagger to someone's throat and they wouldn't even realize their life was in danger.

"No time for chitchat guys! Marble Cloud!"

White smoke spread out across the battlefield, snaking and coiling protectively around Jugo and Kousuke. The smoke swallowed up the two apostles that had been trying to pincer both of them.

"Petrification attempts are meaningless," one of the apostles said.

Indeed, the apostles had such a high resistance to magic that even with their stats lowered, they were nigh immune to earth magic. And yet, by the time the smoke had blown past, the apostles had been turned into pure-white statues.

"I won't let you hurt any of my friends ever again!"

The petrifying smoke then rose into the air and formed into four serpents that chased after another group of apostles. These apostles naturally tried to dodge out of the way, blow the smoke back with their wings, or defend themselves with a layer of disintegration magic armor. And while those defensive measures did work, they also distracted the apostles from the one person they really couldn't afford to forget about.

"There goes another!"

"Ngh, what *are* you?! Are you truly human?!" one of the apostles exclaimed in genuine shock.

"I *am* human, okay!"

Kousuke knew he should be happy that his perfect stealth was working on even the apostles, the strongest beings on Tortus. But it was precisely because his skills were so effective that it hurt to be called inhuman by those very beings.

"Hm? That's strange, my vision's blurring..." Jugo muttered.

No, this is a good thing. I'm glad they're all this scared of me, Kousuke thought. He then assassinated yet another apostle, and this time he chopped her head off on top of destroying her core. He told himself he was doing it to throw the apostles off and show he wouldn't just go for their vitals, but deep down, he knew he was just venting his frustrations on them. Granted, it was working, since now the apostles had to protect more than just their cores from unexpected attacks.

Take a look, Nagumo! See how amazing I am?! I've become the ultimate weapon you were hoping I'd become!

"He's vanished from our consciousness once more! We must report this to our lord!"

"To think a nonhuman got mixed up in the initial summoning. This is a—"

“I’m human, goddammit!” Kousuke shouted, tears forming in the corner of his eyes. He appeared right beside two apostles who were standing back-to-back, then used his twin shortswords to stab through their armpits and crush their cores. They both looked at him in utter disbelief as they crumpled to the ground.

Kousuke’s classmates and the beastmen all showered him with praise.

“Nice going, Kousuke! Though I dunno where you are!”

“Good job, Kousuke! No clue where you are, though!”

“Who’s Kousuke? Oh, you mean Endou-kun! Crap, I totally forgot to cast support magic on him!”

“Wait, is that why all those apostles randomly died? Endou-kun, you’re amazing! I can’t even tell what you’re doing!”

“If you’re going to praise me, could you at least be nicer about it?!”

Tears started spilling from his eyes, and he looked up at the sky.

Oh, I guess it’s raining.

He reenacted that very famous scene for a few seconds.

Anyway, now that I’ve had my fun...

Kousuke slipped behind a bullman warrior and looked for an opportunity to stab the apostle he was fighting. As he waited, he thought about how Meld would have wanted to be here.

I hope I’ve finally become someone you can be proud of, Meld-san.

Meld had held the highest hopes for Kousuke, and at long last, Kousuke felt like he was living up to those expectations. He swore to continue doing so, even after this battle was won.

Gripping his shortsword tight, Kousuke cast his sharp gaze over the battlefield, looking for yet more prey.

Suddenly, he heard a young woman’s cute voice from right next to him say, “He he he... You’re quite the skilled assassin, I see.”

At first, Kousuke didn’t realize that comment was directed at him. After all, he was hidden so well that not even the apostles could spot him. There shouldn’t have been anyone who knew he was there. But when the woman continued staring right at him, Kousuke was so stunned that he nearly had a heart attack.

“No wonder the boss called you our trump card. Even I can’t hide that well,” she continued, her eyes glimmering with admiration and her bunny ears twitching back and forth.

Upon closer inspection, Kousuke realized this rabbitman was gorgeous. He’d never been this close to such a beautiful older woman before, and he blushed profusely when he realized she was staring at him.

Seeing his reaction, the woman grinned and introduced herself, saying, “My name is Lanainferina the Swift Gale. Faster than the wind

and stealthier than the shadows, I'm the Haulia's greatest ninja!"

She adjusted her sunglasses and struck what she must have thought was a cool pose.

"O-Oh," Kousuke replied, unsure of what else to say. But as one of the Haulia, Lana was used to getting weird looks and didn't seem to mind in the slightest.

"Though now that I've seen how you fight, I'm embarrassed I ever thought I was worthy of the title of Swift Gale. It's yours now. What's your name?"

"Kousuke Endou."

He did not comment on how having a nickname like that was already something to be embarrassed about...for Kousuke was an avid lover of older women, and he didn't want to say anything to insult Lana.

"From now on, you will bear the title of Swift Gale... No, since you've surpassed me, I suppose your title should be Kousuke E. Abyss Gate, the Lethal Tempest! It pains me to know there's someone who surpasses me, but you've earned this honor!"

"I-It's fine; you can keep your—"

There was so much Kousuke wanted to ask, including what the hell Abyss Gate was supposed to mean. He was also worried that if he took her seriously, he'd be dragged back into the chuuni era of his past, but ultimately, all of those thoughts left his head as Lana took off her sunglasses and put them on Kousuke.

"This is my gift to you!"

As she did so, her fingers brushed against Kousuke's ears.

"Let us meet again in the brilliant future our boss will create for us, Kousuke E. Abyss Gate, the Lethal Tempest!" she said with a dazzling smile.

Kousuke was utterly smitten. In the face of that smile, his reluctance to return to his chuuni ways vanished instantly.

"....."

Lana was just that charming. Plus, it helped that Kousuke had never had a girlfriend before, and no woman had ever even taken notice of him, much less been this nice to him. That, more than anything, was what made Kousuke so happy. Even the apostles hadn't been able to notice him, but Lana had found him with ease.

"Lanainferina-san... What a wonderful woman..."

I guess this proves whether or not love can bloom on the battlefield.

And that newfound love gave Kousuke the determination to push his natural talents to their absolute limits. Power welled up within him as he once again slunk back into the shadows.

Smiling fearlessly, he adjusted his sunglasses and struck the same pose Lana had earlier.

“Prepare yourselves, apostles. You face Kousuke E. Abyss Gate, the Lethal Tempest!”

On this day, another monster capable of surpassing his mortal limits was born. And like all the others, he was chuuni as hell.

Meanwhile, another fierce battle was happening atop the fortress’s roof.

“Amazing...” one of the templar knights muttered. David nodded, looking equally stunned.

The templar knights’ main job was protecting the priests and moving the Orestes in place to send the apostles’ disintegration beams back at them. As a result, they were running around quite a bit and had a good grasp of the overall situation of the battle.

“The next wave’s coming! Get ready, Saitou!” Yuka shouted.

“Scatter them to the four winds—Raging Storm!”

Though Yoshiaki Saitou had at one point given up entirely on fighting back, Yuka’s constant encouragement had convinced him to stand and fight once more. He opened his eyes wide and raised his stiletto-shaped artifact into the air. Wind swirled around it, and Saitou launched a tornado up at the four apostles that were diving toward the singing choir. Saitou’s job was Aerotheurge, and the artifact Hajime had given him had increased his affinity for wind magic even further. The tornado blew the apostles off course, and they were barely able to land on the four corners of the roof.

“We’re not going down that easily this time—Localized Frost Hell!” Nana thrust her arm forward and cast the strongest ice spell she knew, the aquamarine prayer beads of her bracelet artifact glimmering brightly.

Normally, Frost Hell would have simply frozen everything around the caster, but Nana had focused the spell around only the four apostles, increasing its overall power. This time around, when the apostles found themselves encased in pillars of ice, they weren’t able to break out.

“Shatter like the dolls you are—Break!”

The ice pillars shattered, as did the apostles’ bodies inside of them.

“They’re working! My illusions are working! Atsushi, Noboru, get them!” Akito shouted, the metal book in his hands glowing.

“You got it!”

“On it!”

Akito’s job was Illusionist, and thanks to Hajime’s artifacts, his illusion spells were far more powerful than they had been back at the Demon Lord’s castle.

Two apostles fought each other in front of him, both convinced

that they were fighting one of the students. After a few seconds, they realized their mistake and stared at each other in surprise, but by that time, Atsushi and Noboru had already reached them.

“Do you really think the same trick will keep working on us?” the apostle said, blocking Atsushi’s scimitars with her wings.

“You bet!”

Atsushi’s scimitars started vibrating as they sliced through the apostles’ wings, but she quickly batted them aside with her claymores.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“To think you would improve so much in such a short time.”

The apostle tried to cut Atsushi down, but he blocked every swing she made and often countered with his own. He’d finally realized his job—Arabian Kirito’s—full potential.

Meanwhile, Noboru was also overwhelming the apostle he was fighting.

“Take thiiiiiiiiis!”

His job was Axe Warrior, and his superdense, superheavy axe was capable of unleashing devastating blows, especially when he wound up with a spin first. He was far, far stronger and faster than he’d been when the apostles had bowled him over at the palace. In fact, the apostle he was fighting was forced to go fully on the defensive.

While both apostles were occupied, Yuka threw a single knife at each of them. They tried to shoot the knives down with their feathers, but the knives suddenly dropped in altitude without warning, evading the feathers.

Had the knives been changing direction thanks to magic of some sort, the apostles might have been able to predict it, but in truth, Yuka had simply thrown them like a baseball pitcher’s screwball, so their directional changes were all due to the spin of her knives.

Both knives found their marks, and since they were enchanted with spatial severing magic, they did quite a bit of damage. However, neither knife hit an apostle in their vitals, so the damage was barely worth paying attention to... Or so they thought, but it turned out Yuka’s knives had one last trick up their sleeve.

“Gravity magic?!” the apostles exclaimed as they dropped to their knees.

Naturally, that created an opening for Atsushi and Noboru. With spirited battle cries, both of them cut diagonally through the apostles from shoulder to torso, slicing their cores in the process.

“Nice one, Sonobe!”

“Good job, leader!”

“Save the praise for after the battle! Taeko! Nakano! How’re you —?”

Yuka didn’t even spare Atsushi and the others a glance. She just

thrust her hand back to recall the two knives she'd thrown and moved to her next target.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Burn, buuuuuuuurn! Focus fire—Azure Blaze!”

“Yuka, Nakano’s going on a power trip, heelp!”

Shinji’s job was Pyromancer, and his powerful fire magic was keeping the apostle he was fighting stuck inside her wing cocoon to keep herself from being burned to a crisp. Another apostle tried to shake him off with a feather barrage, but the overwhelming fear, rage, and tension that he’d been feeling for the past few days had short-circuited his brain and he didn’t even try to dodge. Instead, he simply spun his mace-shaped staff in circles to deflect the feathers, then let his sturdy robe take the ones he missed. His appearance, combined with his maniacal laughter, made him look like the evil son of some medieval noble.

On the other hand, Taeko skillfully knocked down all of the feathers coming her way with her whip. Thanks to the Treasure Trove attached to it, the full length of the whip was a few kilometers and Taeko could bring out as much or as little of it as she needed at any given moment. She could also split it up into multiple ends at any time. It looked like she was wielding a mass of tentacles, which kind of scared some of the other students, but the things she was accomplishing with that whip were nothing short of godlike.

“All right, Taeko, you have my permission to whip some sense back into him!” Yuka shouted, throwing her knives at the apostles the two of them were fighting. They hit them square in the back, and as soon as they made contact, Yuka called them back.

Even when an apostle was using their wing cocoon, they couldn’t protect the small of their back where their wings sprouted from, which was the exact spot Yuka kept aiming for.

“Shock Blast!”

After she’d driven the same knife home a few times, she let it stay in and activated its ability to emit magic shock waves. Though the shock waves didn’t reach all the way to the apostle’s core, the damage was enough to break the apostle’s concentration and force her to lower her wing cocoon.

In that moment, Shinji’s blue flames overwhelmed the apostle. There were a few cuts on his cheek where Taeko had smacked him with her whip, and now that he was sane again, he shaped his flames into a spear and pierced the apostle’s core. The flames then went on to penetrate every other apostle Yuka had tagged with her knives, taking down another three of them. Including the six apostles that Yuka had killed on her way here, that was ten that had been taken out in the span of a minute.

David and the others let out gasps of amazement, but unfortunately, things were slowly getting worse for the students.

“Mrr... Yuka-onee-chan! Ru-chan and his friends can’t stop them anymore!”

Myu was referring to her golems, which had been knocking down the apostles coming from below with supergravity fields and shooting down the apostles coming from above with overwhelming firepower.

Unfortunately, as time passed more and more apostles were getting through, and Myu’s golems couldn’t get to all of them.

“That’s okay, Myu-chan! Just do what you can!”

As she said that, Yuka watched as another batch of apostles managed to sneak through the Demon Rangers’ defensive line and reach the roof. They glared at the priests, but of course, Yuka wouldn’t let them harm a single one.

“Let’s do this! Make sure you watch each other’s backs, guys!”

With ten knives in each hand, Yuka launched a blistering barrage against the apostles. Thanks to Hajime, her artifact knives had been enchanted with ancient magic and increased to a full brace of a hundred.

Despite throwing dozens at a time, somehow Yuka’s knives all flew in different directions, and though the apostles were able to still knock them all down with their claymores, it required so much of their attention that Atsushi and Nana and the others were easily able to find openings to attack.

In retaliation, one of the apostles fired a barrage of feathers at the students.

“You’re not getting past me.”

The knife holsters on both of Yuka’s arms also doubled as Treasure Troves, so she summoned a bunch more knives from it, which she caught in midair and threw at the feather barrage to offset it.

Her knife stores seemed endless as she kept on pulling out more and more to keep throwing. She even used her ability to recall knives to recall them at the perfect angle to knock down feathers or distract apostles. With how many she was pulling out of her Treasure Trove, combined with how many she kept recalling, her hands were always full. The speed at which the knives went forward, then back, made it look like Yuka was juggling them horizontally. Why, she’d created a veritable barrier with how her knives were practically everywhere.

“Don’t forget about us!”

“Sonobe-san, it’s fine if a few of them get through! I’ll protect everyone!”

“I’ll hold them down for you, Yuka-san! If there’s any of them you want me to prioritize, let me know!”

“If you need me, Yuka, just say the word! I can handle things here!”

Even the nine students who hadn't fought since Hajime's fateful fall into the depths of the Great Orcus Labyrinth were burning with fighting spirit after seeing how well their comrades were doing. And though they lacked the experience Yuka and the others possessed, they still had the natural talent all those summoned from Earth possessed.

One of the students had the job of Sniper, which normally was meant to improve archery skills, but right now he was wielding a rifle. Sniping could be done just as easily with a gun as with a bow, after all. He was doing a splendid job of picking off apostles while avoiding all of his allies in the chaotic melee that had broken out on the roof.

Another student had the job of Shielder and was doing a splendid job of keeping her allies safe from the apostle's fatal disintegration attacks. Two other female students possessed the jobs Hydrosophist and Lightningweaver respectively, and they kept up a constant barrage of water and lightning spells.

Yet another student had the job Sealer and used her binding chains to slow the apostles down so that her friend, whose job was Blast Mage, could blow them up with his explosion magic.

The last three students all had close combat jobs, Spellblade, Mace Knight, and Pugilist. Those three were still a bit too scared to throw themselves into the thick of the fighting, but they worked together with the Templar Knights to buy time and take down stragglers.

All of them looked utterly terrified, but none of them seemed like they would break despite the nearly endless waves of apostles.

Hajime's speech hadn't just given all of them a temporary boost of morale, it had straight up given them the courage to steel their resolve.

Hajime himself may have just said what he had to to get people riled up, but after seeing what he'd gone through, and what he'd become, the other students had been inspired.

Despite losing an eye and an arm, and even having his hair turn white, Hajime hadn't stopped struggling. Moreover, at the Demon Lord's castle, he'd gone through far worse. Ehit had stolen Hajime's beloved, utterly crushed him in a fight, and left him in a near-death state. And still, Hajime had gotten back up. He'd obliterated all enemies in his path and declared that he would go home, no matter what it took.

To the students who'd lost their nerve, his return from the brink of death had been more than enough to light a fire in their hearts, which had been frozen with fear and despair.

Hajime's actions had helped reforge their souls and remind them

of what they truly wanted.

Every single student wanted to return home and keep their friends safe from harm. Now they knew that in order to accomplish those two things, they'd need to fight with everything they had, the same way Hajime was.

"I'm going back home no matter what! I can't die until he's tasted my cooking at least once!" Yuka shouted, determined to get Hajime to eat at her restaurant. She had to thank him for all the times he'd saved her life.

Of course, that scene wouldn't be complete if Hajime wasn't together with all the people he'd met in this world *and* all of his classmates. This wouldn't be a real victory unless everyone could look back fondly on their adventures in Tortus and tell their stories with smiles on their faces.

That was the ordinary life that Hajime craved so dearly. And because Hajime wanted it, Yuka wanted it as well. It didn't matter if her love was never reciprocated, all she wanted was to be a part of his life, however small.

"So you better hurry up and come back soon!"

As Yuka juggled all one hundred knives with perfect precision, the Canopy shattered for the fourth time. Another storm of disintegration beams rained down in turn, and once again, the Templar Knights hurriedly got the Orestes into position. This time, however, the apostles weren't aiming just for the priests. Unsurprisingly, they'd changed tactics after seeing their current one was ineffective.

"Everyone, watch out! We're being targeted!" Yuka shouted.

Indeed, the beams were heading for the students. Hajime had given all of them defensive artifacts suited to their individual fighting styles that were capable of resisting disintegration magic—for example, Yuka could string her knives together with wires and form a portal to teleport away disintegration attacks—but since the students were all in the middle of combat, they didn't exactly have the time to deploy their defenses. Unable to perfectly counter the disintegration barrage, a lot of the students got hit pretty hard.

For her part, Yuka was able to redirect the beams aiming for her, but as a result, she let one of the apostles on the roof cripple one arm with some feathers. Plus, while Yuka and the others were able to defend to some degree, the nine students who had no combat experience couldn't protect themselves at all. Most of them managed to get behind the Templar Knights' shields, but one of the girls was too far to reach safety in time, so her leg was hit. Grimacing in pain, she squatted down where she was. No one was able to run out to her rescue, and another apostle was closing in to finish her off with a claymore swing.

“Ah!”

The girl’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Hmph...the hero is here!”

Just before the apostle’s claymore reached her, someone appeared in front of her and chopped the apostle’s arm off. As the apostle watched her arm fly through the air, the newcomer stabbed her through the chest.

“Nice save, Endou!” Yuka shouted, cold sweat pouring down her forehead. Indeed, it was Kousuke who’d come to the rescue.

“Heh... Please refer to me as Kousuke E. Abyss Gate, the Lethal Tempest, dear leader!”

Is that really Kousuke? Yuka thought to herself. He was wearing sunglasses and making weird poses.

“Ai-chan-sensei! I think Endou needs spirit magic!”

“Endou-kun, what happened to you?! Did you get PTSD or something?!” Aiko exclaimed, casting spirit magic on Kousuke to bring him back to his senses.

“Hmph! Fear not, for I am still in command of my sanity. I have simply had my eyes opened to the truth!”

Unfortunately, her spirit magic had no effect. The way Kousuke was speaking sounded depressingly familiar as well.

“E-Endou? Wait, are there two of you? What?” Atsushi asked, confused. The apostle he’d been fighting had also had their core stabbed and head chopped off by someone who looked exactly like Kousuke.

“I am a noble of darkness, an envoy from the depths of the abyss. The abyss is everywhere, though most fail to notice it. Do you understand now?”

“No, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Kousuke’s words made absolutely no sense to Atsushi. Still confused, Atsushi watched as an apostle charged at the second Kousuke from behind and bisected him with her claymore. Everyone went pale, but then that Kousuke dissipated like mist.

“Heh, it appears my afterimage fooled you.”

Considering the fact that it had been able to interact with the physical world, it couldn’t have been a mere afterimage, and yet, a second later, Kousuke reappeared behind the apostle and once more split in two. The two Kousukes then worked in tandem to decapitate the apostle and stab her core.

All of the other apostles froze, their attention focused wholly on Kousuke.

“Wh-What the heck is going on?” Yuka muttered, confused.

Kentarou, who’d been watching the southern battlefield the whole time, looked over his shoulder and explained, “Don’t worry about

Kousuke! He's discovered the power to...clone himself, I think? Anyway, that's what's made him act all chuuni too!"

"Heh, I have indeed awoken to the powers of the abyss. It speaks —"

"The point is that they're all Kousuke, but he won't die, so don't worry!"

"Heh."

Upon seeing the cringe poses Kousuke was striking, Yuka and the others couldn't help but worry. Even if Kousuke survived this battle, once he snapped out of his chuuni trance, he'd probably wish he'd died. Regardless, everyone accepted the explanation that Kousuke had developed a new power and went back to their respective battles.

"This changes nothing. You will still all die," one of the apostles said as another dozen of them landed on the roof.

"Struggle all you wish; you are only delaying your inevitable doom."

It was true that Yuka and the others were all heavily wounded. And though the armies on the fields down below were performing admirably, they'd suffered quite a few casualties. More and more apostles were breaking through to the fortress, so everyone could tell humanity was losing this battle of attrition.

"That won't stop us from trying," Yuka replied. Though her arm was bleeding profusely and she was grimacing in pain, she still stood tall. She wouldn't be able to fight as effectively anymore, but she still grabbed a bunch of knives with her good hand and got ready to throw them.

Atsushi and Nana brandished their respective weapons as well. None of them had given in to despair.

Seeing their unbroken resolve, the apostles' expressions darkened.

Yuka grinned and added, "Besides, aren't you forgetting someone?"

"Hm?"

"We still have the strongest fallen angel on our side!" Yuka exclaimed in a cheerful voice. A second later, silvery-black light rained down on the battlefield, and the apostles looked openly shocked.

"We're just getting started!" Yuka shouted, summoning more knives into her now completely healed hand.

Chapter III: The Valkyrie's Pride

In the skies, beams of all colors clashed against the silver blasts of the apostles. It looked like a scene right out of a sci-fi space battle.

The dragonmen's breath attacks were going against the apostles' disintegration magic, creating a truly legendary scene. And eventually, a scarlet dragon much larger than the others let out a thunderous roar.

"Focus on the apostles banding together and combining their mana! We need to lessen the strain on the Canopy as much as possible!"

That was the dragonmen's main goal. They were trying to reduce the burden on the Canopy, as well as make sure few attacks and apostles made it to the fort every time it broke. After all, the harder the dragonmen fought, the more the apostles would have to shift their focus from breaking through to fighting the enemies in front of them.

"Adul Klarus! To think you survived the destruction of your nation!" one of the apostles that had fought Adul in the past exclaimed. Back then, they'd been given the order to eradicate everyone, so the fact that they'd failed galled them.

In an attempt to make up for their previous failure, the apostle launched a disintegration blast at Adul.

"Of course I did. I ignored the plight of my country and lived on, accepting the shame that came with it...all for the chance to destroy here and now!"

Adul leaned back and breathed in deeply, his chest expanding. He then let out a deafening bellow, and his red-hot dragonbreath collided with the apostle's disintegration beam.

Five hundred years ago, his breath would have been swallowed up by the apostle's beam, and he would have died. But not today. As the two beams collided, shock waves rippled out. The two attacks looked to be equal in force, but then a second later, Adul's breath swallowed the apostle's beam.

"So you've grown this strong?"

"That I have...and it's all thanks to the Demon Lord's gifts!"

Adul's body was covered with far more than just his scales, for every last inch of him was clad in artifacts designed for him in his transformed state. Most of the artifacts had the same abilities as the ones the soldiers had equipped down below. There were also a few imbued with evolution magic that upgraded the power of the

dragonmen's breath attacks, though. And of course, all of the dragonmen also had Last Sees on them, granting them Limit Break.

Right now, every dragonman's breath was ten times as strong as normal. In Adul's case, that meant he could melt an entire mountain with his. He'd been the strongest dragonman when he'd become the previous Dragon King, and now he was ten times stronger than that. An apostle would need to charge for almost a minute to gather enough power to disintegrate a breath attack that powerful. But of course, no one was going to give any of the apostles that much time.

"You would do well to tell your little god that the time has finally come for him to be dragged off his throne!"

There was no response, which made sense, considering Adul's breath had burned the apostle to cinders.

"Chief!"

Another apostle tried to shoot down Adul while he was exposed from having just used a breath attack, but then the young indigo-colored ice dragon, Ristas, came in and erected an ice barrier.

Ristas had been prepared to die when he'd jumped in to save Adul, but the disintegration beam did little more than destroy his barrier and erode some of his scales. The armor Hajime had given him was quite durable.

"Thank you, Ristas," Adul said as he launched a breath attack at the apostle, incinerating her.

"Don't thank me. I barely did anything. If it wasn't for that youngster's armor, I would have died..." Ristas said in a somewhat begrudging tone. He didn't want to admit Hajime had saved his life, but one look at the battlefield made it obvious that without Hajime, the dragonmen wouldn't be faring nearly as well.

The gravity magic artifacts he'd given all of them increased their flight capabilities significantly, allowing them to zoom through the air as fast as the apostles. Moreover, the spatial-magic claw and tail artifacts Hajime had given everyone allowed them to pierce the apostles' flesh with ease. Weakened though the apostles were, it was only thanks to those artifacts that Adul and the dragonmen were able to take on a detachment of apostles twice as large as their own forces without suffering heavy casualties.

"He he... I see you still haven't given up on Tio despite seeing how smitten she is with our Demon Lord. How admirable of you."

"I-It's not like—"

Adul could easily tell Ristas's reluctance to praise Hajime came from jealousy. Honestly, he respected Ristas for still wanting to pursue Tio even after seeing what crazy fetishes she had awoken to.

"Th-This has nothing to do with the princess! I just dislike that arrogant youngster!" Ristas shouted as he flew off. He then chased

after a nearby apostle and fired a barrage of breath attacks in an attempt to vent his frustration.

“Adul-sama, you can gossip later! Please focus on the fight right now!” a blue dragon said as she flew over. It was Tio’s old wet nurse, Venri.

“Oh, come now, a little talk never hurt anyone.”

In truth, Adul hadn’t let his focus slip for even a second while he’d been talking. He’d just been replenishing his strength because he’d noticed the Canopy was about to break again.

Suddenly, a ring of flame appeared above Adul. It pulsed ominously, gaining in strength and glowing brighter with each pulse. Sensing danger, a group of apostles rushed at Adul, but Venri blocked them all to buy him some time.

A few seconds later, the Canopy shattered.

“Spin, O burning wheel of destruction. Crimson Eradicator!”

This was a special spell that Adul had created from his own breath. By turning his breath into a rotating ring, he increased its destructive power and the amount of area it could cover. It was a feat only someone as powerful as the Dragon King could accomplish.

At Adul’s command, the ring shot forward, slicing through every apostle in its path. The apostles that managed to avoid instant death still caught fire and were burned away a few seconds later.

“It seems I wasn’t able to stop all of them,” Adul said as he looked down.

“It’s not your fault. There were just too many of them. Have faith that those fighting down below will be able to handle things,” Venri replied.

“I know, I know.”

Adul had managed to stop most of the disintegration beams and apostles from reaching the ground, but a decent number had still made it through. There was just too big a gap in numbers between the dragonmen and the apostles. They couldn’t take care of everything.

Meanwhile, on the ground, where mortals outnumbered apostles by a good deal, they were faring surprisingly well. Still, Adul was frustrated that he couldn’t do his job properly.

Seeing his expression, Venri smiled and said, “Don’t worry, Adul-sama. They still have her.”

She then looked off into the distance, where a veritable incarnation of grace and beauty was tearing through apostles like wet tissue paper.

Some distance away from where the dragonmen were fighting, a lone black streak shot through the army of glowing silver apostles. It moved erratically, creating sharp angles where it turned, making it

impossible to track.

“She’s too fast...” one of the apostles muttered, her core split in two before she’d even realized it. Another seven apostles had been taken out in the same instant. They all went limp and fell to the ground.

Wherever the black streak went, death followed. All of the apostles in its path were ripped apart without being able to do a single thing.

“That’s far enough!” three apostles shouted in unison, stacking together to try to stop the black streak. Two of them were cut in half, but the third was able to stop their assailant for a brief moment.

Crossing her twin claymores in a cross shape to block the incoming attack, the apostle exclaimed, “How dare you, Kaori Shirasaki!”

Kaori was wearing black clothes, and had black hair and wings. She looked like the quintessential fallen angel thanks to Hajime’s makeover.

Naturally, she was also the black comet that was keeping a thousand apostles at bay all by herself. She danced gracefully across the sky, overwhelming the apostles with ease.

“That makes one hundred!”

“Gah!” the apostle yelped. Not even three of them together could slow Kaori down. Though the apostle had managed to block a single one of Kaori’s blows, she’d been immediately overpowered. Kaori cut off both the apostle’s arms, then sliced through her core.

The apostle hadn’t even been able to see how it had happened. Lowered though their stats were, the apostles were still unbelievably strong physically. And yet, this apostle hadn’t even been able to *see* Kaori’s attacks, much less defend against them.

The apostles were being killed before they even saw what hit them. Kaori thrust her claymore forward and swung it in a circle, blowing away another group of helpless apostles. She then swung the blood off her blade and once again started to accelerate.

“Sto—!”

“Godspeed.”

With that one word, she entered the world of speed, leaving everything else behind. The apostle had probably been trying to say stop her to her comrades, but she didn’t even get to finish. Of course, the fact that she’d reflexively tried to say it aloud, even though she could instantly share her thoughts with all the other apostles showed just how desperate they were getting.

Either way, none of the apostles were able to do a single thing to Kaori. The ones that had moved forward to try to physically block her path were ripped to shreds. And this was all thanks to the newest

restoration magic spell Kaori had devised, Godspeed. It was one of the trump cards she'd prepared for the upcoming battle.

The true nature of restoration magic involved interfering with the concept of time, and Godspeed made it so that the time every single one of Kaori's actions took was reduced to a fraction of its normal use. That included everything from the time it took Kaori's attacks to reach her enemies to the time it took for her to move from place to place.

Of course, the apostles had realized this was what Kaori was doing.

"She's far surpassed the level of mere mortals."

"She's using Limit Break as well as her own evolution magic. Without both of those, she wouldn't be able to use that Godspeed spell in actual combat."

"It must be costing her a massive amount of mana to use all of that magic together. How many more times can she stand to use that spell?"

The apostles quickly exchanged information among themselves.

All of their conjectures were correct. They were also adapting to Kaori's fighting style pretty fast, so they quickly realized that since Kaori was physically moving from place to place rather than teleporting through space, all they had to do was carpet-bomb everything along her path.

All one thousand of the apostles fired their disintegration beams in random directions. They also created numerous magic circles with their feathers, firing off lightning and fire spells all over the place. And of course, they made sure not to hit each other.

Thanks to their ability to share information, they could coordinate with each other regardless of how chaotic or fast the fighting got.

"Kaori Shirasaki. You will die here."

The apostles had to stop Kaori here. If they didn't, she would easily destroy the apostles fighting down below. On the flip side, if the apostles that had made it to the fortress were able to take out the priests, the ones here would be able to defeat Kaori.

"What a coincidence. I was thinking the same thing about you guys. I won't let a single one of you past me."

For her part, Kaori wanted to get in the way of as many apostles as she could. The armies down below were just barely managing to beat back the apostles already on the ground, so if the thousand here went down, humanity would be overwhelmed in an instant. She cut down one, then ten, then fifty, then a hundred. The apostles' blood rained down to the ground below, followed by their corpses.

Meanwhile, the sky was filled with silver, red, and yellow as disintegration beams, thunderbolts, and fire covered every inch of the aerial battlefield. Some apostles rushed recklessly at Kaori, hoping to

get a single blow in before they were killed.

“Yaaaaaaah!”

“Haaaaaaaah!”

They let out fierce cries as they rushed forward.

For the apostles, this was a true nightmare. They were fighting with all of their strength yet were still getting steamrolled.

Thus far, people had needed to band together and fight as groups to resist even a single apostle. But now, they were the ones that had to work together to try to defeat just one of Ehit’s enemies. Their pride as his apostles had been severely shaken.

No, that’s not strictly true. In the past, there was one other who was able to effortlessly defeat us. But she—

Seeing Kaori’s determined eyes, the apostles thought back to the only other time that they’d encountered someone who was far superior to them. In most ways, Kaori was nothing like that girl, but her ironclad resolve was just like hers.

“Have you finally reached your limit?” the apostle said as Kaori stopped moving. There were numerous gashes on her arms and legs, and her face had been severely burned. The concentrated attacks were slowly beginning to wear Kaori down. Moreover, her mana stores looked to be depleted. Regular restoration magic was already quite mana-intensive, and restoration magic that directly interfered with time was even worse.

No matter how much mana Kaori possessed, she would eventually run out. On the other hand, the apostles were receiving an unlimited supply from the Sanctuary.

“You fought well, all things considered,” the apostle said, looking coldly down on Kaori as her arms drooped and she panted heavily to catch her breath.

Indeed, Kaori had managed to kill three hundred apostles in a very short time span.

“But this is as far as you go. Give up and accept your fate.”

Tragedy and despair were Ehit’s favorite things to see, and it was his apostles’ job to present them to him.

“A human’s Limit Break cannot last indefinitely. Aiko Hatayama appears to be reinforcing everyone’s souls, but even then, normal human souls cannot withstand the strain of Limit Break for long.”

Even if the apostles weren’t able to take down the choir, the mortal armies would soon run out of steam.

The apostle expected Kaori to despair after she pointed out the cruel reality to her, but to her surprise, Kaori simply grinned fearlessly.

“Heh... I can tell you really want to make us lose hope. Too bad for you, but I don’t even know how to give up.”

“Have you gone blind? Look at what’s happening down below. More and more of your precious comrades are dying by the second...and most of them are getting horribly injured. Regular mortals can barely keep fighting after losing a limb. You may be strong, but the rest of your army isn’t. Besides, you’re also running out of strength. Do you really think you can turn this situation around on your own?”

If so, then you’re sorely mistaken.

In response, Kaori sucked in a deep breath and said, “There are three things you’re wrong about.”

“Is that so?”

The apostle gave Kaori a curious look, but a second later, her eyes went wide in surprise.

“Reap the bounty of your everlasting harvest—Anima Ernte!”

A huge amount of mana surged from Kaori, and one of her black claymores began to glow. It looked as though her mana was surging into her sword.

Noticing something strange about that mana one of the apostles shouted, “Impossible! You appropriated our mana?!”

“You didn’t think it was strange that I was using different swords this time around? Not realizing that was your first mistake.”

The apostle’s guess was right on the money. Anima Ernte was the new healing spell that Kaori had imbued her Sword of Demonic Reclamation with. The spell itself allowed Kaori to transfer her mana to a different target, and the various evolution, gravity, spirit, and metamorphosis magic spells her sword was enchanted with also allowed her to transfer the mana of whomever she cut over to her.

“Your second mistake was assuming that I’ve spent all my strength—Hallowed Stigmata, activate!”

Though it didn’t seem like Kaori had cast magic, she started healing as fast as Yue did with her natural regeneration. Confused, the apostles stared intently at Kaori. And after a few seconds, they noticed there was a silvery-black magic circle on her chest.

“Is that...?”

“My restoration magic. As long as I have enough mana, my body and equipment will keep being repaired.”

It was obvious where Kaori had gotten that idea for this from. Now that she understood the true nature of restoration magic, making herself quasi-immortal was nothing exceptional, especially not when she’d had her number one rival, the one person she’d spent more time around than even Hajime, to learn from.

“Why did you wait until now to activate that spell? Had you used it from the start, you would never have taken any damage.”

The more apostles Kaori killed, the more mana she’d stockpile,

allowing her to once again use Godspeed and Hallowed Stigmata, creating a vicious cycle the apostles wouldn't be able to break.

Of course, they weren't expecting Kaori to give them a straight answer. Still, they'd asked to try and buy time to find that answer on their own. Though their expressions remained emotionless, the slight tightening of their lips made it clear that they were feeling pressured.

Grinning, Kaori replied, "Because I figured you'd stop for a bit once you thought I was cornered."

"What do you—?"

"That's your third mistake. Thinking we're the ones on a time limit. So what if people are dying? So what if Limit Break doesn't last forever? Who do you think you're up against here?"

Kaori reversed her grip on her second sword, her white one, and pointed it straight at the ground. It began to glow just as the Canopy was destroyed yet again.

"Arise once more and be protected—Lexion Bell!"

A single silvery-black drop fell from the tip of her sword. When it was only a few meters above the ground, it stopped and exploded in a burst of light. Waves of silver-black rippled across the battlefield, swallowing up the soldiers.

A second later, all of the injured men stood back up, their wounds completely healed, their missing limbs regenerated, and their armor fully repaired. Not only that, but even the soldiers who had been killed started getting back onto their feet.

"You're...reviving an entire army...?"

The apostles' shock was showing on their faces now. The soldiers who'd been dead until just a few seconds ago patted themselves down, surprised to find themselves fully healed. When they saw their friends and comrades crying tears of happiness as they ran over to them, the previously deceased soldiers finally realized what had happened to them. The entire army let out a thunderous cheer, louder even than the one they'd let loose when the battle had begun.

"I may have swapped out my body and started fighting on the front lines, but I always have and always will be the healer of the Demon Lord's party. No matter what happens, Kaori Shirasaki's job will remain Priestess."

Kaori fixed her grip on the white sword and pointed it straight at the apostles. This sword—the Sword of Divine Blessings—greatly enhanced Kaori's restoration and spirit magic, allowing her to cast wide-area magic that only affected her allies. With this sword, even powerful revival spells like Lexion Bell weren't beyond Kaori's means. Granted, not even Lexion Bell could revive corpses that had been mostly disintegrated. Still, aside from that, it could take care of everything, including the Limit Break time limit. Though that also

required some help from Aiko.

Kaori had one black demonic sword for stealing her enemies' mana and one white divine sword for healing her allies. The pair was a perfect fit for a healer like her.

"Even so...you still cannot win. Our lord's will is absolute. His word is law."

It was hard to tell if the apostle truly believed that, or if she was trying to convince herself it was true. Either way, Kaori adjusted her stance and flapped her silvery-black wings, her gaze piercing straight through the apostles.

"Humanity won't fall...and this world won't either. Just like how one boy with barely any strength managed to crawl his way out of the abyss, people will always find a way to survive any crisis. We're just too stubborn to die. As long as there's at least one person left who's still struggling to protect others, still struggling to stay alive, they'll be able to overcome any obstacle, no matter how 'absolute' it is."

The apostle at the head of the group glared back at Kaori. As the two of them stared each other down, it felt as though the clamor of the battle down below faded away and they were the only two people left in the world.

"Siebente."

"Huh?"

"It means 'seventh.' That is my identification number. Moreover, I am the sole single-digit apostle on this battlefield."

"So...what?"

Kaori had no idea why the apostle had bothered to name herself, and honestly, neither did Siebente. Siebente just knew that she'd had to. Though she didn't realize it, her pride as one of Ehit's chosen valkyries had compelled her to.

"Remember it, for it is the name of the apostle who will prove to you that Lord Ehit's will is absolute!" Siebente roared as she brandished her twin claymores, her wings glowing brilliantly.

Sensing Siebente's determination, Kaori let her own mana surge out and shouted, "Then I'll prove to you that nothing is absolute!"

If Siebente was Ehit's valkyrie, then Kaori was the Demon Lord's, so she had her own pride to uphold.

Kaori and the apostles led by Siebente clashed once again, and the valkyries danced a dance of death high up in the sky.

Siebente and the others had decided to stay on the defensive and look for an opening to strike back against Kaori.

Meanwhile, Kaori was cutting down apostle after apostle, using her mana to keep her large-scale recovery spell going.

Their battle raged for so long that Kaori lost all track of time. Because the sky was covered in a red veil, it was impossible to tell the

time from the sun's position either.

Though the soldiers fighting down below were still holding out, the Canopy was taking longer and longer to regenerate with each cycle. There were still enough spare parts left to keep repairing it, but the synergists actually doing the repairing were starting to grow exhausted. Furthermore, many of the soldiers had expended all of their bullets, and many of the larger cannons on the walls were also silent. Worst of all, the death toll was growing as more and more soldiers were mangled so badly they couldn't be revived. The situation was still even enough that it could go either way, however, and the soldiers were fighting with everything they had. They still believed that Hajime and the others would be able to put an end to this battle once and for all.

It was at this critical moment that something appeared to decisively tip the scales in one side's favor.

The first person to notice was Liliana.

"Huh? Wh-What is that? Wait..."

The large screen in the command room projected the entire battlefield onto the wall, and Liliana was looking at the disturbance happening at the base of the destroyed Sacred Mountain.

Is that black stuff mist...? No, it looks more like gel.

Indeed, some sort of black substance was oozing out of the rubble that had once been a mountain.

A second later, a bloodcurdling noise echoed across the battlefield.

"Wooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Chills ran down the soldiers' spines, and they looked over at the Sacred Mountain. The black sludge exploded upward and coalesced into a single creature in midair.

Kaori knew that creature all too well.

"No way... Is that a Devourer?"

Indeed, the large jellyfish-like creature looked just like the ancient monster that had given Hajime and the others so much trouble after they got out of the Sunken Ruins of Melusine.

Kaori was so surprised that she stopped where she was. Even Siebente let a little emotion show on her face when she looked over at the Devourer.

"I suspected it might have survived. It took longer than expected to regenerate, but...this is perfect timing. As part of Lord Ehit's collection, do your duty and clean up this rabble."

That was the moment Siebente had been waiting for. As Kaori turned back to face her, the black Devourer shot its countless tentacles out in all directions. It then started to pulse, sending *something* through its tentacles into the corpses of the monsters buried below the

mountain's rubble.

"That is known as the Mother of Sin. It is an ancient creature that can put other beings under its control by feeding parts of its body to them...and it matters not whether those beings are alive or dead."

"No way!"

If the Devourer was a creature that grew by consuming other beings, the Mother of Sin was one that grew by letting itself be consumed. Of course, because it sent its own cells into other creatures, there was a physical limit to how many things it could control at once. However, supplying it with mana allowed it to regenerate the parts of its body it had sent out. Moreover, the things it mind controlled retained their original forms and abilities; they were just utterly loyal to the Mother of Sin. It could even bring back corpses by using its cells to supplement any damaged or destroyed body parts.

The revived monsters burst through the rubble and let out a series of howls as they charged toward the combined armies of Tortus.

"Seriously, they've got reinforcements? Normally, I'd say bring it on, but...this might be a bit too much for us," Gahard said, looking worriedly at the charging army. He was covered in blood from head to toe, half of it belonging to his enemies and the other half himself.

There was more bad news too. The Canopy was destroyed again for the umpteenth time, but this time, the synergists were too spent to repair it. The scales were beginning to tip in the apostles' favor.

"All armies, send whatever units you can spare to the north! If the monsters manage to join the melee, we'll be overrun! We have to stop them here!" Liliana shouted through her telepathy artifact.

Gahard immediately started doling out orders, and Heiligh and Ankaji's armies began to mobilize as well.

Unfortunately, there were still apostles left in the middle of those armies...and turning your back on an apostle was a fatal mistake. Unsurprisingly, the apostles were able to wreak far more havoc now that a chunk of troops was distracted.

"Oh no!" Kaori shouted, looking down.

"Feel free to leave, but know that we will destroy the choir if you do!" Siebente shouted, preventing Kaori from rushing down to kill the monsters.

Gritting her teeth, Kaori turned back to Siebente. She couldn't afford to leave the apostles here alone. Even if she used Godspeed, by the time she'd culled the monsters' numbers, Siebente and the others would have slaughtered the priests. There were already five hundred or so apostles heading straight for the fortress rooftop now that the Canopy was gone.

Of course, Kaori could bring them back if they were killed, but she doubted Siebente and the other apostles would give her the chance to.

After all, once the choir was stopped, the apostles would immediately return to their full strength.

The ground rumbled as the swarm of monsters descended upon the allied armies, kicking up massive dust clouds in their wake. There were more than ten thousand of them, and their roars alone were enough to demoralize the soldiers. Worst of all, until the Mother of Sin was defeated, those monsters would keep reviving indefinitely. In fact, the Mother of Sin was working on bringing more of the monsters under the rubble back with each passing second.

Kaori didn't know how many monsters the Mother of Sin could bring back with its size, but she *did* know that there were tens of millions buried under that mountain. Humanity's greatest advantage, their numbers, would be overturned before long if this kept up. And once that happened, Tortus was doomed.

"I-I'll do something about them!" Aiko shouted through her communicator. She then sent one of her Hyperions over to the monsters. The other six were all out of solar energy, but Aiko had kept one in reserve just in case it was needed to deal with an emergency. It only had enough energy for one shot, but hopefully, that would be enough to kill the Mother of Sin, even if Aiko couldn't wipe out the monsters. Though of course, that would require getting in range first.

"Too slow!" one of the apostles shouted, firing a disintegration beam at it. The Hyperions were never meant to be mobile weapons. They were designed to work as defensive artillery, so they were quite slow.

"I told you time and time again, Lord Ehit's will is absolute!"

"We haven't been beaten yet! I just have to beat that monster while taking care of all of you at the same time!"

"As if you can do that!"

Kaori once again activated Godspeed, rushing at the mass of apostles. Unfortunately for her, Siebente and the others were focusing purely on defense and evasion to make it harder for Kaori to keep replenishing her mana by defeating them.

Whenever she managed to find an opening, Kaori shot a disintegration beam at the Mother of Sin. Sadly, it was too far away. At full power, Kaori's beam would still be able to reach and destroy it, but that would require some charging time, which the apostles were determined to make sure she didn't get.

It's just barely not enough! If we just had just one more trump card on our side, we'd be able to take care of that monster!

Kaori wracked her brain for potential solutions, but she couldn't think of anything.

The monsters were about one kilometer away from Tortus's exhausted armies now. As soon as they arrived, the armies would be

ripped apart and the mortal races would lose.

I'm begging you guys, please hold out somehow!

All Kaori could do was pray And miraculously, her prayers were answered.

“Asura.”

The ground vanished, along with all the monsters on it. Or at least, it seemed that way to Kaori until she looked closer and realized a perfectly square-shaped section of earth had just been pushed very far down. There was now a huge hole that was a full square kilometer in size to the north of the battlefield...and all of the monsters occupying that square had been completely flattened.

“Gravity magic?” Kaori muttered. She’d seen Yue use it plenty of times before, but there was no way Yue was present.

Who is it? Who else has that much power and can use gravity magic?

Naturally, the soldiers, including the usually unflappable Gahard, were also stunned.

Unexpectedly, it was Siebente who answered everyone’s unspoken question. In a voice dripping with hatred and fear, she shouted, “Miledi Reiseeeeeen!”

Upon hearing that, Kaori finally remembered that Hajime had indeed mentioned that someone called Miledi would be coming as reinforcements at some point.

Sparks started shooting out of the air between the giant hole and where Tortus’s armies were. The air started to twist and warp, forming a portal from which an army of four hundred golems sprang forth. Once they were all out, a massive golem king that stood at around twenty meters came out behind them. Finally, a small golem with a smiley-face mask came out, an extravagant robe draped around her shoulders.

“Always there to save the day when people need her—super beautiful genius mage Miledi-chaaaaaan takes the stage!”

Miledi turned back to the armies of Tortus, raised one leg into the air, put one hand on her hip, made a peace sign with her other hand, and winked at the soldiers with her tongue sticking out in a cutesy fashion.

Miledi Reisen, the creator of the Reisen Gorge and the leader of the Liberators who had once challenged god and failed, had finally returned to the surface. She had spent countless years believing that someone capable of defeating god would eventually appear, and at long last, her wish had been fulfilled.

Everyone stopped dead in their tracks, including the apostles. But while the soldiers were mostly just confused, the apostles looked equal parts afraid and furious.

“Man, what a surprise. I don’t think I’ve ever had timing this

perfect before! I guess I'm just that good! Oh, but don't go falling for me now, guys!" Miledi's annoying voice carried easily across the battlefield.

Though no one said anything aloud, in their hearts all of the soldiers were thinking, *Holy shit, she's so annoying!*

For the first time since deciding they would fight against god, all the mortal races were united in heart and soul.

Miledi ordered her golem knights to take care of the second wave of monsters the Mother of Sin had revived and flew over to Kaori.

Annoying as Miledi was, Kaori was still grateful for the reinforcements, so she smiled at her.

"Miledi-san! My name's Kaori! You need to—"

"Man, it's so weird seeing someone who looks like an apostle acting like a normal person with normal emotions! This is the biggest shock ever!"

"Thanks, but we don't have time to chat! Miledi-san, you need to —"

"Come on, we're all friends here. Call me Miledi-*tan*, not Miledi-san!"

Kaori gave up on trying to have a serious conversation with Miledi.

"Shea was right. You really are annoying," she said as she shot Miledi a withering look.

"When you put it like that, it kinda hurts..." Miledi replied, her smiley face mask drooping a little.

"Miledi Reisen! Why is a specter of the past like you here?!"

The apostles fired disintegration beams at Miledi from all directions.

Kaori quickly moved to defend her, but that proved unnecessary.

"Heavensfall."

Numerous gravity spheres appeared around Kaori and Miledi. They rotated around the two of them, absorbing the disintegration beams and redirecting them back at the apostles.

"Hmph, who said you guys could butt in?! I'll punish you all later, so be good little girls and wait for your turn. Heavencrush."

Miledi's tone was joking up until the moment she said the name of her spell, at which point it became stone-cold. Her sky-blue mana surged and a second later, a massive black sphere appeared above the Mother of Sin. The air around it then began to swirl and electric sparks crackled across the sphere's surface.

Even a legendary ancient monster like the Mother of Sin could do nothing in the face of such destructively powerful gravity magic. The surrounding rubble was swallowed up, along with all of the monsters in the area, including, of course, the Mother of Sin.

“All right, that takes care of that! All that’s left is about...three thousand of them? My golems will hold the front lines for you, so do your best to take care of the apostles left in your ranks, members of the alliance army,” Miledi said, using her own communicator to address everyone.

“Sh-She’s the reinforcements that the Goddess’s Sword called over for us! Onward to victory, everyone!” Liliana shouted, snapping the soldiers out of their stupor. They’d been subconsciously annoyed by Miledi, as everyone who saw her for the first time was, but upon hearing that she was their reinforcements, they all let out triumphant cheers. If she was one of the Goddess’s Sword’s friends, it made sense to them that she could take out tens of thousands of monsters and the Mother of Sin in one shot.

Meanwhile, Miledi’s golems started tearing into the revived monsters that had been far enough away from the Heavencrush to avoid getting sucked in. Their power was overwhelming, to the point that the soldiers were able to take a short breather and gather their bearings.

Despite Miledi’s impressive display of force, however, they weren’t out of the woods just yet.

“I’m sorry, Kaori-chan,” Miledi said quietly via telepathy as she continued deflecting the apostles’ disintegration beams.

“Huh?”

Kaori turned to her and was surprised to see Miledi looking sincerely apologetic.

“I won’t be able to fight for long. That’s why I was conserving my strength until it was absolutely necessary. I saw how much you guys were struggling before, but...I’m sorry I couldn’t come right away.”

Miledi clearly didn’t want to let any of the apostles hear this. Kaori didn’t know how strong Miledi was in the past, but it was obvious to her that the apostles were wary of Miledi. In fact, they were as guarded around Miledi as they were around Kaori. They seemed to believe that if they let their guard down for even an instant, they’d be obliterated.

Kaori pressed her back against Miledi’s, smiled, and replied, “That’s fine. You’ve already done more than enough. Thank you so much for coming, Miledi-san.”

“You mean Miledi-tan.”

Well, that sure ruined the moment.

Kaori’s expression turned serious and she charged at the apostles without bothering to reply. Thanks to Miledi’s support, she had a much easier time cutting through the apostles. Kaori was taking them down about as quickly as when she’d first taken to the battlefield, like before they’d changed tactics to counter her.

As she watched Kaori fight, Miledi muttered, “Meru-nee, the girl who inherited your magic is way stronger than we were.”

She honestly sounded happy to be outdone.

Thanks to Miledi’s appearance, the scales had started tipping in the other direction. At this point, it was the forces of Tortus that had the edge.

The apostles couldn’t do a thing to stop Miledi, and they were just barely unable to reach the choir, as Yuka and the others were putting up fierce resistance. Moreover, Kousuke seemed to grow continually stronger with every passing moment now that he’d awoken to his shadow-clone powers.

Of the five thousand apostles who had made up Ehit’s initial army, a thousand of them had already been killed. There were only a hundred or so apostles left to oppose Kaori, and Siebente had lost an arm and a leg. And to make matters worse, the apostles received extremely troubling news from the Sanctuary.

“Shea Haulia and Tio Klarus...” Siebente muttered, stopping suddenly. Upon hearing that, Kaori stopped as well and watched her intently.

“To think not even Hearst and the others could stand up to them.”

Indeed, it was at that very moment that Shea defeated the five platinum apostles, and Tio killed Freid and destroyed his monster army.

“Shea and Tio won!” Kaori shouted excitedly.

“Hearst? I remember that name. So she finally kicked the bucket, huh?! Nice going, bunny girl hero! Hey, apostles, how does it feel to get owned?” Miledi asked in her trademark annoying voice.

Unfortunately, they didn’t get to rejoice for very long.

“It is no longer possible to annihilate the mortal races of Tortus with the forces we were given. Rejoice, Kaori Shirasaki. You have indeed shattered the pride of us apostles.”

Siebente’s voice was quiet, but filled with emotion. Kaori’s instincts were telling her that something bad was coming, as Siebente’s expression was cold, but not in the usual emotionless apostle way.

“What are you going to do, then?” Kaori asked.

“Request a boon from Lord Ehit.”

They had been created by Ehit to fulfill a specific purpose, but now that was no longer possible, so they would turn to him for help. For the apostles, it was a bitter decision, akin to abandoning their *raison d’être*, but they had no other choice.

“Oh no! Kaori-chan, we have to stop them!”

Sadly, Miledi’s warning came too late. The crack in the sky—the gate leading to the Sanctuary—emitted a burst of silver light, and

another five thousand apostles poured out of it. Fighting on even terms with the first five thousand apostles had been hard enough, but now they had double the number to deal with. Originally, these extra five thousand apostles had been meant to be kept in reserve so they could serve as the vanguard when Ehit invaded earth, but now they couldn't afford that luxury.

The new army of apostles formed together in a spindle formation much denser than the one the first wave of apostles had used, then started charging their disintegration magic. They looked like a divine spear that had suddenly appeared high in the sky.

Chills ran down Kaori's spine and her face went pale. If they took that attack, the soldiers would be toast.

"I won't let you!" Kaori shouted, shooting upward.

"All units, focus fire on the reinforcements above us! We cannot let them unleash their attack!" Liliana said, her orders echoing across the battlefield.

Siebente and the others tried to stop Kaori, but Miledi easily pinned them in place. Meanwhile, the soldiers below fired every single anti-air weapon they had up at the divine spear that was forming.

Adul and the other dragonmen fired their breath attacks at it as well, even though it exposed them to attacks from the apostles they were fighting. Unfortunately, the apostles had already spent a decent amount of time charging before they'd even stepped through the gate, so their shimmering silver spear was ready all too soon.

"You won't get past me—Ultimate Hallowed Ground!"

Kaori stepped in front of the path of the spear and crossed her claymores in front of her, generating the most powerful barrier she could muster. The spatial magic her gauntlets were enchanted with enhanced the barrier, making it even stronger.

I hope this is enough, Miledi thought, firing a Heavencrush at the spear even as she kept Siebente and the others at bay. It ate a significant chunk out of the spear's side, and also swallowed up the apostles still coming out of the gate. But unfortunately, that wasn't enough to stop the spear's momentum.

The spear crashed into Kaori's barrier, then started eating through it. Kaori, of course, used restoration magic to keep repairing the destroyed sections, but that wasn't enough.

"I...can't stop it... Everyone, run!"

Soon enough, the barrier shattered and the shock wave sent Kaori flying. That thankfully prevented her from taking a direct hit, but as the spear passed her by, it still ripped off her right arm.

The Divine Spear fell, crashing into the barrier protecting the pope's choir. After a few seconds, it blasted through that barrier as well and the silver spear plowed into the fortress.

Half of the fort was destroyed immediately and half of the powerless priests were vaporized in an instant. Kaori had managed to just barely move the spear off course, and Yuka and the others had acted quickly to evacuate everyone, which was the only reason why the remaining half of the choir survived. Still, the damage was catastrophic. And worst of all, this forced the priests to stop singing. The main spell keeping the apostles weakened was gone, so they would be able to brandish their full power once more.

Pillars of silver light shot up all over the battlefield, and a second later, blood sprayed everywhere as the apostles started slaughtering the soldiers. In seconds, there were mountains of corpses all over. The soldiers who had been shouting war cries until now all started screaming in terror.

“This will at least buy us some time—Field Reversal!” Miledi shouted, squeezing out the last of her strength to reverse the gravity acting on all the apostles. The spell itself was a simple one, but using it on all the apostles at once was exceedingly difficult. It was clear Miledi was pushing herself past her limits, as her mask started to crack. Still, it worked and the majority of the apostles were sent hurtling into the air. They’d been pushed up a good six hundred meters before they were able to regain control of their mobility.

Siebente and the apostles that had been fighting Adul and the other dragonmen joined up with the four thousand-odd apostles that had suddenly been thrown skyward.

“It’s time we put an end to this,” Siebente stated, brandishing her claymores. All of the apostles followed suit, then started charging their disintegration magic.

There was no Canopy to defend the soldiers down below anymore, and the apostles were at full strength. Thus, this concentrated barrage would easily annihilate the allied army.

The dragonmen were firing their breath and the soldiers were using all of their antiair weapons to try to cull the apostles’ numbers, but now that they were back to full strength, their defenses were far too tough.

They wouldn’t be able to stop the apostles at this rate. All they could do was watch helplessly as the silver lights up above grew brighter and brighter.

I was hoping to save this, but...I might have to use it here... Miledi thought to herself, preparing her final trump card. Before she could use it, however, Kaori took action.

“Not so fast!” she shouted, placing herself between the apostles and the allied army. She’d finished restoring her missing arm, so she spread both arms wide.

“Ultimate Hallowed Ground!”

A pale violet barrier spread out to cover the entire army. It was the color of Kaori's own mana, not the silver mana of the apostle body she was inhabiting or the silvery-black mana she'd had after using metamorphosis magic on herself to look like a fallen angel.

The color of one's mana was a reflection of their soul. In other words, this was a barrier Kaori had bet her very soul on.

"Perish," Siebente said simply. Then, the four thousand apostles unleashed their fully powered disintegration beams at Kaori.

There was a thunderous boom and a violent explosion of light as the beams collided with Kaori's barrier.

"Nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnngh!" Kaori let out a pained scream. It felt like she was trying to stop a meteor shower with her bare hands. Her silvery-black wings began to flicker, and she was slowly but surely being pushed back toward the ground.

"Tetragrammaton! Godspeed! Limiter Removal!"

Kaori used Godspeed to allow her to regenerate her barrier instantaneously whenever it was broken and also used the ultimate evolution magic spell to push her abilities even further. Using three ancient magic spells at once, with one of them using the principles of that magic's true nature, took an unbelievably ridiculous amount of mana. Kaori gritted her teeth so hard they cracked and tears of blood spilled from her eyes.

"Brave warriors, deploy your barriers. Do everything you can to support her!" Adul shouted. All of the dragonmen overlapped their barriers with Kaori's, trying their hardest to ease her burden even a little.

"I have the utmost respect for your resolve—Spatial Severance!" Miledi exclaimed, expending the last of her remaining power to create a gravity field to absorb as many of the disintegration beams as possible.

The soldiers on the ground were also doing everything they could.

"Sing! Sing, dammit! If you've got breath in your lungs, then sing!" Simon shouted. He'd been lucky enough to be part of the group that had survived. He and the dozen or so priests that remained were bleeding all over, but they sang at the top of their lungs to try to weaken the apostles even a little.

"I beseech you in the name of the fertility goddess. Grant our valkyrie your strength!"

Aiko used spirit magic to transfer as much of the soldiers' and the other students' mana as she dared over to Kaori. Had any of them resisted, it would have been difficult for Aiko to maintain that spell, but of course every single one of them was willing.

Meanwhile, the beastmen who possessed no mana became literal meat shields to physically protect Aiko from the few apostles still on

the ground.

It was hard to tell how much time passed. It might have been a few seconds or a few minutes. To Kaori, at least, it felt like an eternity. But eventually, the beams died down.

“Haaah... Haaah, we did it...” Kaori muttered, panting heavily as her pale-violet barrier began to fade. Her wings kept fading in and out of existence, and she started falling to the ground. Miledi hurriedly flew over to support her.

“Nice going, Kaori-chan! You really are one amazing girl!”

“Miledi-san...” Kaori mumbled. She was utterly spent, to the point where even her soul was in an exhausted state. The same was true for the dragonmen, the soldiers, and Aiko and the other students. Everyone had squeezed out every last ounce of strength they’d had just to endure that attack.

After a brief pause, the apostles started charging again. This time they grouped up into sets of ten, creating silver lights so bright they looked like mini-suns.

“As I have said time and time again, Lord Ehit’s will is absolute,” Siebente stated, her voice reaching everyone on the battlefield.

Kaori and the others wouldn’t be able to restore their mana in time. This next attack really would kill everyone. There was no avoiding it.

At long last, the soldiers started to give in to despair. But not Kaori, no. Still panting, she once again raised both arms. She wouldn’t give up no matter what happened.

Upon seeing her, the soldiers held their breath. Her gallant figure was so inspiring that they couldn’t help but be moved. Pushing aside their despair, the people down below resolved to give her their very souls if that was what it took.

“Hold out for as long as you can, even if it’s just for a second longer!”

Kaori wasn’t saying that out of desperation, but rather faith.

In that extra second they held out, her beloved Hajime might be able to put an end to Ehit. No, he definitely would. Of that she was certain, which was why she would keep struggling until the very moment of her death.

Once again, the sky was filled with silver lights. The barrier Kaori had erected this time was as brittle as a pane of glass. However, it did last for a second, and indeed that second was enough to win them their future.

“He he, see? What did I tell you?!” Kaori exclaimed proudly, smiling.

The silver lights dissipated, leaving Kaori and all the soldiers down below still intact.

“Impossible... Lord Ehit is struggling so much that he cannot even supply us with mana?” Siebente muttered in shock as she looked up at the gate. She then looked down at Kaori. And as their eyes met, she pursed her lips...before her body went limp and she started falling. The same thing happened to the other apostles, and they all hit the ground like lifeless rag dolls.

The apostles on the ground weren't faring much better. In the command room, half the ceiling and two whole walls had been destroyed. Liliana was backed into a corner with only her maid Helina left to protect her. Helina desperately held her dagger out in front of her, facing off against an apostle. That apostle had her claymore raised high to deal the finishing blow, but it was at that moment that she froze.

Bleeding from a deep gash in her chest and panting heavily, Helina warily stepped forward and stabbed the apostle. And somehow, her weak thrust was enough to cause the apostle to collapse.

“Princess...”

Helina turned back to Liliana and flashed her a wide smile. Feeling hope swell in her chest, Liliana activated the cameras that were still working and projected the situation outside onto one of the remaining walls.

The apostles the soldiers were fighting had all stopped as well. Realizing immediately what had happened, Liliana took a deep breath and activated her communicator pearl.

“Central command to all units.”

The apostles in the air had all fallen, while the ones on the ground were frozen in place. The horde of monsters Miledi's golems had been fighting started scattering in all directions as well. Everyone was severely injured and utterly exhausted, but they all looked up at the fort as Liliana spoke.

“We've—”

They could tell she was about to announce that the races of Tortus had won, and they waited with bated breath for the proclamation. But just before Liliana could finish her statement, Adul interrupted her.

“Wait, what's that...? Don't tell me the Sanctuary is...”

Adul was looking up at the crack that served as the gate into the Sanctuary. The sky all around it was twisting and warping.

Cracks started to appear in the sky, and from those cracks, Adul caught glimpses of fantastical other worlds. The air began to creak and groan as if the very world was on the verge of falling apart.

“Hajime-kun, Yue, guys...” Kaori muttered worriedly, looking up at the gate. Something strange was clearly happening in the Sanctuary. It looked like it was on the verge of collapsing, even.

Kaori was so exhausted that it was a struggle just to stay

conscious, but once she realized Hajime and the others might be in danger, the fire returned to her eyes and she weakly flapped her wings, trying to head to the gate.

“Don’t worry!”

“Miledi-san?”

However, Miledi gently patted Kaori’s head with her metal hand and stopped her from going toward it.

“Thank you, Kaori-chan. Because you worked so hard, I was able to save my final trump card.”

“What’s that?”

Miledi didn’t bother to explain and instead simply winked at Kaori.

“Leave those guys to me. Everyone’s favorite idol, Miledi-chan, will get them all out safe and sound for you.”

Miledi then flew up into the gate, and Kaori didn’t even try to stop her. The sheer sense of resolve in Miledi’s words had overwhelmed her. More than anything though, she’d felt an immense amount of love coming from Miledi at that moment.

The strength drained from Kaori’s limbs, and she muttered, “I’m counting on you, Miledi-san.”

As she’d promised Hajime the night before the final battle, she would trust in them and wait. And honestly, all of the other people on the battlefield felt the same way as they gazed up at the collapsing sky. They fervently prayed for Hajime’s victory.



Chapter IV: The Truth Behind God and the Final Battle

With Shea's and Tio's words of encouragement ringing in his ears, Hajime allowed the pillar of white light to whisk him away. He sped through a kaleidoscope of rainbow-patterned space, then arrived in a world of pure white. It was impossible to tell how far it stretched. He couldn't see any walls or ceiling or even the ground. Everything everywhere was white, and though he could feel his feet touching something when he looked down, it looked no different from anything else.

If this was Ehit's throne room, it was a fitting one indeed.

"Welcome to the heart of my Sanctuary."

Hajime had been longing to hear that voice. It was a bit deeper than he remembered, but it was unmistakably that of his beloved Yue. However, while just hearing that voice brought him joy, it also greatly fueled the rage burning in his heart.

After all, though it was his beloved Yue's voice, the sardonic tone was one she would never take.

It felt like a drop of sludge had polluted a perfectly pure pool of water, which prompted a sudden urge to hurl within Hajime. But with an iron will, he tamped down on his seething fury. In order to convert his rage into strength, he knew he needed to keep his cool and channel his emotions.

Taking a deep breath, Hajime slowly looked up. A single structure had appeared in this space of uniform white. It was a ten-meter-tall pyramid-shaped altar. Like everything else, it was pure white and Hajime had to strain his eyes to discern it from its surroundings. And when he did, he noticed there was a single black speck on the pyramid's apex.

"I decided to age the body up a little after taking control of it. What do you think? This mature beauty is the most fitting form for a god, no?"

Indeed, the adult woman sitting on the throne atop the pyramid looked stunningly beautiful in her black dress. Her golden-blonde hair and slender figure were the same as when she'd looked younger, but her face looked more mature, her breasts were much larger, and her legs longer. Her dress was cut low, the shoulders bare, and had a gash through the legs to emphasize her sensual charm. Anyone who saw

her would be captivated by her, regardless of gender. One playful wink from her would be enough to melt anyone's heart or make them prostrate before her in worship. That was how unbelievably beautiful Yue's adult form was.

Her legs were crossed, and she had a faint smile on her face, her chin resting in her hands, but Hajime showed no reaction whatsoever. All he felt was disgust, since he knew the person inside that body right now wasn't Yue.

"Blegh! I can't believe it looks this ugly without the right person to bring out the body's beauty."

Yue's—or rather, the otherworldly god who'd taken over her body, Ehitrufe's—smile grew wider.

"Heh, I can feel your wrath even from here. There's no point in trying to hide it. I can see right through you."

"Why do you sound so satisfied about seeing the obvious? I'm warning you now, you're better off keeping your mouth shut. The more you talk, the more you reveal how petty you are," Hajime replied lightly, his expression unchanged. It was obvious from the way he said it that he wasn't just trying to needle Ehitrufe and that he truly believed that.

That, more than anything, got to Ehitrufe...and his smile vanished.

"I command you in the name of Ehitrufe—kneel!"

He used the same powerful Divine Edict that had immobilized Hajime and the others back at the Demon Lord's castle. It was a spell that forced whomever he cast it on to follow his commands regardless of what they wanted.

Hajime bent low, but before Ehitrufe could start gloating there was a loud bang.

"You've neutralized my Divine Edict?" he said in a mildly surprised voice, looking down at the bullet stuck in the barrier surrounding his pyramid.

"You already used that trick on me once. Repeating the same act is the mark of a third-rate performer."

Hajime pointed Donner at Ehitrufe, and the self-styled god narrowed his eyes dangerously. Though his smile was gone, his relaxed pose made it clear he still thought he had the upper hand.

He stretched out one hand, and a second later, the space around Donner and Schlag, as well as Hajime's Treasure Trove, began to warp. This was the same spell he'd used at the Demon Lord's castle to either teleport away or destroy all of Hajime's artifacts without any visible portal or spatial magic tell. But again, his attempt ended in failure. There was a slight popping noise and space returned to normal, leaving Hajime's artifacts completely unharmed.

"I see. So you did prepare some countermeasures."

“You must be pretty stupid if you were expecting me not to.”

“Don’t get too cocky, Irregular. Just because you found a way of stopping my Divine Edict and Heavenstep doesn’t mean—”

“Shut up, you fuck.”

“.....”

Hajime leaped up and used Aerodynamic to land in the air at a height slightly above where Ehitruje was sitting. Then, cracking his neck from side to side, he pulled Schlag out of its holster and tapped it against his shoulder. After that, he gave Ehitruje a piercing glare and coldly stated, “I’m going to rescue Yue and kill you. That’s all there is to it.”

Ehitruje himself held no value whatsoever to Hajime. Even when in front of a god, Hajime’s arrogance didn’t waver.

“Very well,” Ehitruje replied, rising to his feet. “Let us see how long you can keep up that attitude.”

He then flashed Hajime a cruel smile.

“This is my final game in this world. I suppose it’s fitting I take part personally.”

A wave of pressure so powerful it was almost palpable washed over Hajime, and Ehitruje unleashed a burst of platinum mana as bright as the sun. He rose into the air and spread his arms wide, his hair splaying out behind him and the sleeves of his black dress fluttering in the wind.

As soon as he reached Hajime’s height, the altar below began to get farther away. It was as if the two of them had suddenly shot up much higher into the air. In truth, though, it was the ground that had gotten farther away, for Ehitruje had expanded the amount of space in this dimension.

The reason for that soon became obvious. His pulsating mana converged, forming a triple-layered halo behind him that was easily one hundred meters in diameter. After a second, Hajime realized the geometric patterns of lines and circles inside the halo meant it was actually a huge magic circle.

Ehitruje snapped his fingers...and countless bullets of light appeared from the magic circle. There were so many of them that Hajime felt like the entire milky way was bearing down on him. Every single pinprick of light easily had enough force to destroy a building.

Ehitruje smiled, looking truly divine in Yue’s beautiful form with a shimmering halo and a sea of stars behind him. Anyone who didn’t know how awful a person Ehitruje was would certainly think the figure before them was a god. However, Hajime was unfazed.

“Don’t bother holding back, because I won’t be—Limit Break: Overload!”

Hajime’s mana was a stark contrast to Ehitruje’s, a deep crimson

that looked almost like blood. And in the center of the raging storm that was his mana, his Demon Eye glowed like a ruby. And with his stats increased fivefold, his mana was powerful enough to push back even Ehitruje's. Crimson and platinum warred, splitting the dimension into two distinct halves.

Countless crosses appeared behind Hajime—his newest assault artifacts, the Crosswelts. They were pure black, with crimson patterns running down their length. Though they were half the size of his previous Cross Bits, each one of them had far more mana packed into it, and they were enchanted with a more complex array of ancient magic.

Not only were the Crosswelts far stronger than his Cross Bits, but there were a full thousand of them. Lined up behind him, they looked like the graves of all the enemies he'd slain. And naturally, Hajime the Demon Lord had every intention of adding the god Ehitruje to that graveyard.

On one side was a gorgeous platinum halo and countless lights that twinkled like stars. On the other was a violent storm of crimson and a thousand black crosses. It was god versus the monster of the abyss. Air crackled and twisted, breaking apart under the force of these two giants.

Ehitruje's lips curled up into a sneer and he raised one hand. The rainbow-colored veil that Hajime had stepped through to get here vanished, cutting off his only path of retreat.

The battle began, and it was Ehitruje who made the first move. "Let the game begin! The first act shall be a dance!"

He elegantly swung his arm down, and the stars turned into a meteor shower as they shot toward Hajime.

"Sorry, but I'm not interested in being your playmate. You can keep playing your stupid games in hell," Hajime replied coolly, and his Crosswelts all rotated ninety degrees, their muzzles pointed at Ehitruje. Sparks ran down their length, and there was a thunderous boom as a thousand rail gun-accelerated bullets shot toward the barrage of stars. Each of those shots was an Area Burst Bullet, and they exploded in unison halfway between Hajime and Ehitruje, the explosions looking like mini stars in their own right.

But of course, that was just both sides' opening volley. Ehitruje continued spawning stars from his magic circle, while Hajime's Crosswelts kept on firing off a barrage of special-made bullets.

"Good, good. It would be boring if this was enough to overwhelm you," Ehitruje stated with a smile, then snapped his fingers again.

Suddenly, a new threat appeared from within his massive magic circle. Namely, a group of human-shaped figures made of pure light. Upon seeing their twin claymores and the wings on their back, Hajime

immediately realized what was going on.

“They’re as strong as regular apostles. Don’t lose too quickly, all right?”

With the barrage of stars still going strong, a veritable army of light-forged apostles surged toward Hajime. Naturally, Ehitruje was able to make an endless supply, and more and more kept coming out of the magic circle as well.

“Who do you think you’re talking to? A battle of numbers is where a synergist truly shines.”

Hajime raised his right hand, his ring-shaped Treasure Trove glowing. The crimson light spread outward, swallowing up the apostles. The moment they entered the light, their charge stopped. Then, there was a loud screech of metal scraping against metal, and the apostles were sent flying out of the bubble of light.

“Oho, an army of...golems?” Ehitruje mused as the light faded away to indeed reveal a large army of golems.

However, they looked strange enough that even Ehitruje seemed a bit puzzled. They were enchanted with numerous ancient magic spells, decked out with all the heavy weaponry Hajime could make, and were clearly autonomous. All of that was normal enough, so the strange thing was their shapes. Six hundred of them had the bodies of lions, wings, and the heads of eagles—the griffin types. These were designed for mid- and close-ranged combat. Another two hundred were shaped like behemoths and had long-range artillery. The last two hundred were shaped like three-legged crows—modeled off of the legendary Yatagarasu—and specialized in speed and flight.

It wasn’t just their shapes that were animalistic either; they had been imbued with metamorphosis magic and were at least partially organic. However, they felt no pain and never grew tired, making them the perfect army for the unstoppable Demon Lord. Hajime had dubbed his thousand golems the Grim Reapers.

Ehitruje and Hajime both commanded their armies at the same time.

“Apostles of light, eliminate those disgusting creatures!”

“Reapers, hunt down those artless puppets.”

The apostles shot forward, and the griffins and crows moved forward to intercept them.

As the griffins moved into place, panels on their back slid open, and together they launched a barrage of six thousand pencil rockets at the apostles. The massive explosions they caused temporarily stopped the apostles in their tracks.

While the barrage trapped them in place, the crows shot forward on jet-propulsion legs, using gravity magic to enhance their speed even further, and opened their beaks to reveal the rail guns hiding

inside. They then swiftly moved into position and started sniping at the apostles from angles that made them impossible to defend against. After that, they flew high into the air and started raining cluster bombs down on the apostles from the Treasure Troves stored in their stomachs.

A few of the apostles retreated away from the bombing zone, which was exactly what the griffins had been waiting for. They surged forward and struck with claws, beaks, and wings, which were all enchanted with spatial severing magic, as well as with the shotguns hidden in their mouths. The shock wave-enhanced, multistage bullets slammed into the apostles, ripping through them.

The main difference with these apostles made of light was that they had no core, so their bodies weren't as sturdy. Thus, the golems didn't need piercing bullets to damage these apostles, as regular shock wave bullets were enough to dismantle the light comprising their bodies. But on the flip side, Ehitruje could keep producing these apostles indefinitely as long as his magic circle was active.

Within seconds, Ehitruje had produced a few hundred more. And in response, the behemoth golems fired a long-range barrage from the ground. There were four Gatling rail guns on each behemoth's back, all of them twice as long as a tank's turret. They also had rocket launchers attached to their sides, and a 120-caliber minigun sticking out of their mouths. To top it off, their horns were capable of firing hyperfocused heat lasers.

The behemoths were taking the apostles out as soon as they spawned, blasting them apart before they managed to fully emerge from the magic circle, even. Naturally, Ehitruje himself was also being targeted by that barrage, but he didn't seem at all worried.

"I see. It looks like I'll be able to have some fun after all."

All of the attacks that got close to Ehitruje were blocked by some invisible barrier that seemed to extend a short distance out from him in all directions. Ehitruje watched as his apostles got torn apart, and every now and then a golem got so close to being defeated that it self-destructed in an attempt to take out as many apostles with it as it could.

"Just how much ancient magic did you pack into these things? I can't imagine a human managing such a feat. So this is the power of Transcendence... I must say, it's been a long time since anyone has appeared with that skill. When combined with ancient magic, it can go pretty far. Though more impressive than that is how much of your old world's knowledge you've incorporated into these designs. It's truly fascinatin—"

"You really just don't shut up, do you? Are you that desperate to have someone to talk to?"

Hajime interrupted Ehitruje's ruminations with shots from Donner and Schlag. Two streaks of crimson weaved their way expertly through the barrage of platinum stars, Crosswelt shots, and the pitched fighting of apostles and golems. But while there were only two gunshots and two streaks, the number of piercing bullets Hajime had fired was twelve. He'd simply fired with such precision that each streak was actually six bullets in a straight line behind each other. One streak headed straight for Ehitruje's forehead, while the other shot right at his heart.

Hajime's aim was perfect...and it seemed not even god's ultimate barrier was strong enough to stop these shots.

There was a sound of shattering glass as the barrier crumbled.

"So you can even break through my barrier?! Not only that, but you're willing to aim at your beloved girlfriend's vitals without hesitation... You certainly are entertaining, Irregular!"

But while Hajime's shots penetrated the barrier, they did no damage to Ehitruje. He'd spawned several black spheres around him, using the gravity magic Heavensfall. They were smaller than Yue's, about the size of a child's fist, but they were far more effective than hers. He'd also created them way faster than she could, since he'd done it in the time after his barrier had been broken but before the bullets traveling at supersonic speed had hit him.

Hajime's expression stiffened a little, while Ehitruje's smile grew deeper. Now it was his turn to go on the offensive.

"Fourfold Void Fissure."

Spatial tears closed in on Hajime from all sides, each strong enough to rip him apart.

"Nothing you've shown me once will work twice!" Hajime roared. He had upgraded his Demon Eye to let him visualize spatial distortions as well, and he—along with twenty of his Crosswelts—was able to escape the area of impact before the Void Fissures went off.

"Heavensfall."

A high-pressure gravity field appeared above Hajime, but it was unable to knock him down thanks to the necklace he was wearing. There were seven rings on the chain, and one of them glowed for just an instant.

This was his all-purpose defensive artifact, the Guardian Talisman. It was capable of nullifying or at least weakening the effects of all seven types of ancient magic when used against him. And right now, it was nullifying the section of the gravity sheet Ehitruje had created that was near him.

Ehitruje quickly realized what was going on.

"Void Fissure, Soul Shock, Devastation, Beholder."

He fired off different types of ancient magic one after another. The

first was a simple physical spatial explosion, the second was a direct attack on Hajime's soul, the third was an attempt to destroy his artifact with creation magic, and finally, a bit of evolution magic that touched on the branch of magic's true nature to fully understand the capabilities of Hajime's artifact. In response, the rings on Hajime's Guardian Talisman that corresponded to Spatial, Spirit, Creation, and Evolution magic began to glow.

"Oho...impressive. I suppose I should change tactics, then."

Chills ran down Hajime's spine as he heard that. A moment later, vortexes of platinum light appeared in front of, behind, and all around him, shooting out tiny balls of light from all directions.

"You're gonna have to do better than that!" Hajime shouted, and his Crosswelts formed into groups of four, deploying barriers on all sides except in front of him. He didn't even have to connect them with wires, since they could all move autonomously. As shimmering barriers rose to protect his back and his flanks, he pulled out a new weapon to deal with the stars coming from dead ahead.

At first glance, it looked like his Gatling gun, Metzelei. However, it was nearly thrice as large, for this was his new and improved Gatling cannon, Metzelei Disaster. Basically, he'd stuck six Metzeleis together and called it a day. Still, that made it six times as powerful...and allowed it to shoot six times as many bullets. And frankly, seventy-two thousand shots a minute was nothing to sneeze at.

There was a whirring noise as it spun into action, spitting out bullets so fast they made a stream and raining a torrent of spent shells to the ground below. The storm of bullets tore through the platinum stars, the vortexes that birthed them, and even the apostles in Hajime's line of fire, to head straight toward Ehitruje.

"That's quite the weapon. Very well, let's take things to the next level."

Platinum vortexes appeared on either side of Ehitruje. But unlike the others, these were for sucking things in rather than spitting them out.

The stream of bullets split down the middle and changed course, each half sucked into one of the two vortexes. Had those vortexes been mere Spatial Severances, they would have been overloaded, but it seemed while these vortexes shared the same properties as that spell, they were much sturdier.

"So even this isn't enough, huh?"

Hajime called over another contingent of Crosswelts and had them shoot down the remaining vortexes that were spitting silver stars at him. The Area Burst Bullets continued to be effective, and they handily dispersed the platinum vortexes. The Crosswelts then changed

formation and formed a rough sphere around Hajime.

“Still, that defense of yours isn’t impenetrable. If that wasn’t enough, I just need to up the destructive power.”

Hajime stowed Metzelei Disaster back in his Treasure Trove and instead pulled out his 88-millimeter rail cannon, Schlagen AA. The shots from this gun were powerful enough to rip through even earth’s battleships. The bullets’ size, speed, and power were at the level of a tactical warhead. Hajime doubted that even those platinum vortexes would be able to suck these shots in.

However, Ehitruje remained unruffled as he replied, “By the way, Irregular, how did you manage to kill Alvaheit? Though he didn’t have quite as much divine power as me, he was still a god, and you were on the verge of death.”

His tone was conversational.

Indeed, even Hajime’s most powerful rifle, Schlagen AA, couldn’t harm Ehitruje. The moment he fired a shot, Ehitruje deployed a fivefold barrier. Unlike his previous one, this one was visible and shimmered with platinum light.

His bullet penetrated through four of the barrier’s layers, but it only managed to put cracks in the final one. However, Hajime didn’t seem dismayed in the slightest.

“Hah, don’t make me laugh. That piece of shit wasn’t even close to a god. He died begging for his life like a coward.”

He just looked down on Ehitruje and moved on to his next trump card. He deployed an Orestes portal behind Ehitruje and fired Schlagen AA directly to his side, through the adjoining portal.

Another powerful bullet sped toward Ehitruje from behind. Of course, Ehitruje had his giant halo-cum-magic circle behind him, but Hajime was hoping he’d be able to destroy that first, if he was lucky. Since he wasn’t going directly after Ehitruje himself, he thought maybe the so-called god would be slower to react.

“You make it sound so easy. Ufu fu, there’s no point in trying to hide it. You had to use Concept Magic, didn’t you?”

However, Ehitruje didn’t even need to defend his halo. The bullet caused it to flicker a little, but did no lasting damage whatsoever. Moreover, the bullet wasn’t even able to pass through it, confirming that it was a barrier in its own right.

In response, Ehitruje swung his hand down and a powerful laser shot out of the halo. Hajime could tell at a glance that it was disintegration magic, just of a different color than the apostles’.

The beam cut through the battlefield, demolishing a good number of Hajime’s Grim Reapers and Crosswelts. Hajime himself leaped away to avoid it, then swapped out his Schlagen AA for his rocket launcher—Agni Orkan—to take care of the apostles and platinum balls that

had flooded through the newly opened hole in his Crosswelt defense network.

“What?!”

But just then, a spear of pure compressed lightning lanced toward him from out of nowhere. It was so condensed it looked solid. This was one of the spells Ehitruje had developed, Thunder God’s Lance. The attack was so sudden that even with his Demon Eye, Riftwalk, and evolution magic to enhance his senses, Hajime hadn’t been able to see it coming. Still, he was able to react fast enough to get his Agni Orkan up to shield himself.

Unfortunately, the attack was powerful enough to blow up his prized rocket launcher.

“Gah!”

Agni Orkan had already been loaded with several missiles and they all blew up with it, creating a massive explosion. On top of that, Thunder God’s Lance burst as it impacted Agni Orkan, sending lightning sparking off in all directions.

The combined force of those two was enough to pierce Hajime’s Diamond Skin, as well as his coat, which was made of a super-sturdy alloy, to damage him directly.

I guess he’s still got a few tricks left up his sleeve.

Wary of his surroundings, Hajime immediately started bounding away. He knew if he stood still, he’d just get hit with more attacks.

“As for the concept you created...it was probably the power to kill gods, right? Let me guess, that’s the trump card you’re hoping to use against me. This whole time, you’ve been eyeing me like a hawk, waiting for an opportunity to use that little thing you have hidden in your pocket, haven’t you?”

The halo behind Ehitruje switched up its attack pattern and started shooting out numerous disintegration beams at random intervals. The light spheres coming out of it also split into two sets, the usual small stars and slower, larger ones that took longer to come out. Compared to the tiny ones, the large ones looked more like shimmering bubbles than stars. They covered a large portion of the battlefield, making maneuvering annoying...especially because they exploded any time one of the Grim Reapers touched them.

If the tiny stars were like bullets, then the larger ones were like bombs. And to make matters worse, the bubbles moved in unpredictable ways. The fact that Hajime was still able to weave his way through this dense minefield proved once again that his skills were nothing short of godlike.

“You probably think you’ll be able to use that to separate me from your vampire princess and destroy only my soul, don’t you? He he he...”

As Ehitruje laughed, an Orestes portal appeared directly over his head and several Crosswelts rushed through it. They fired a sweeping barrage at him, while Hajime continued pressuring him with superbly accurate shots from Donner and Schlag.

Ehitruje swung his arm above his head, bisecting all of the Crosswelts that had teleported over. Whatever invisible blade he'd used, it had spatial-rending properties. Before the Crosswelts could fall, they self-destructed, pelting Ehitruje with shrapnel. However, the metal fragments were all knocked away with another sweep of Ehitruje's arm before they reached him.

The bullets Hajime was firing off with Donner and Schlag were sucked into the vortexes on either side of Ehitruje and spit out right back at him.

Ehitruje was quite strong, just as Hajime had expected. He could cast faster than Yue, and his spells were stronger than hers. Anyone other than Hajime would have been instantly killed by his attacks. And from the looks of it, Ehitruje wasn't even using his full strength yet.

Hajime pretended to look thoughtful for a moment, then sighed.

"So you've noticed. Well, no point in hiding it, then. If you're so confident that won't work, why not let me hit you and see what happens?"

"Ha ha ha ha... Big talk for someone who doesn't even realize what the problem with that is. Oh, this is just rich."

Ehitruje laughed heartily, stopping his attacks for a moment just to torment Hajime with what he believed to be the truth.

"They were exquisite, you know?"

"Huh?" Hajime mumbled.

"The screams of that vampire princess. What was her name again? Oh, yes, Yue."

"....."

Hajime's face went blank.

"She fought well...for someone who'd had their body stolen and been reduced to nothing more than a soul. I watched her final moments. She was trembling in fear and screaming in pain. As the last vestiges of her soul faded away, she whispered, 'I'm sorry, Hajime.' Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"....."

"You're too late, Irregular. There was no hope of ever rescuing your girlfriend in the first place. Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Ehitruje cackled, but Hajime's resolve remained undaunted.

Calmly, he resummoned Schlagen AA and fired. But of course, Ehitruje blocked it with his shimmering barrier and frowned at Hajime.

“How boring. She was the person you cared about most in the world, wasn’t she? Why are you so unfazed?”

“On the contrary, what makes you think I’d believe anything you say, you wannabe god? Only an idiot trusts their enemy’s words,” Hajime replied with a sneer.

Ehitruje gave Hajime a searching look. Hajime’s insults meant nothing to him, but the fact that he’d denied his divinity, and more importantly sounded like he truly *didn’t* think Ehitruje was a god, had given him pause.

“What makes you believe I’m a wannabe? For all your bravado, you have yet to even scratch me. Can you not tell that this is the difference between man and god?”

“Oh, I can tell. Tell that you’re no god, that is.”

Surprised, Ehitruje asked in a curious voice, “Oho, and what makes you so sure?”

“Simple. You weren’t able to tell Yue was still alive when she was trapped in the abyss, and you hadn’t noticed some of the dragonmen had survived and fled beyond the continent. For someone who supposedly created this world, your reach doesn’t extend very far,” Hajime stated flatly. Then, like a philosopher stating self-evident truths, he added, “Besides, you clearly need a physical vessel, both to manifest in this world and to travel to other ones, which means your true state is one of flesh and blood.”

In other words, Ehitruje had spent all this time until now as just a soul because something had forced him to, not because it was how he naturally was. Hajime suspected the Sanctuary existed to help extend his life span while he was stuck in that state, which meant that while Ehitruje possessed extraordinary powers, he wasn’t a god.

“You’re human.”

However, he was clearly a very different kind of human from the people living in Tortus. Moreover, even Yue and Tio hadn’t considered the possibility of other worlds existing, and yet Ehitruje had come up with the idea of summoning people from one. Unless he’d coincidentally discovered one, there was only one explanation for how he’d cooked up such a plan.

“And like us, you probably came from a different world.”

Hajime doubted all of the various ruins of past civilizations he’d seen during his journey through the Sanctuary had once existed on Tortus. Some of them were just too different, too alien, so he’d arrived at the most logical conclusion.

Impressed, Ehitruje actually clapped and replied, “You’re the first person to realize that. But allow me to correct you on one point.”

Ehitruje unleashed a massive burst of mana.

“Ngh!”

Hajime had to cover his face and leap a few dozen meters back, and the Grim Reapers that were too close to Ehitruje were obliterated instantly. However, this mana burst was no attack. Ehitruje had simply unleashed his true power, and this had been the shock wave of that.

I figured he'd be able to use a Limit Break of some kind. Either that or it's some sort of evolution magic, anyway.

The three-ringed halo grew larger, then started glowing brighter. A wave of crushing pressure washed over Hajime.

Ehitruje raised a hand into the air. Lightning, flames, wind, ice, and white smoke came out of his magic circle and started coalescing into different forms.

Hajime had seen this before. Though, the power of these elemental dragons was far greater than anything Yue had ever managed to create.

The most terrifying thing of all, however, was that these dragons also had glowing red eyes.

“You transformed them into monsters?”

Using his Demon Eye, Hajime could see a pulsing red stone in the center of each dragon. A magic stone, the heart of every monster. It seemed that by using spirit and metamorphosis magic, Ehitruje had pushed Yue's dragons to a whole new level.

“There is a secret technique that uses the power of faith to elevate one's existence to a higher level...and that technique has undoubtedly granted me divine might. Therefore—”

Ehitruje's five monster dragons coiled around him. Inhabiting Yue's body, he looked every bit like an imposing goddess with a host of dragons at his beck and call.

In a solemn voice, he intoned, “I am a god.”

The five dragons let out bloodcurdling roars, and Ehitruje once again resumed his magic circle's barrage. Balls of platinum light shot toward Hajime...and legions of apostles made of light surged forth.

Hajime was losing more and more of his Grim Reapers and his Crosswelts, but Ehitruje's forces were limitless. Moreover, thanks to whatever Limit Break he'd used, his attacks had grown faster and more powerful.

Feeling pressured for the first time, Hajime broke out in a cold sweat, his expression stiffening.

Well, I was prepared for this from the start.

Shrugging his shoulders lightly, he took a deep breath. Things were finally getting serious, and he had no intention of letting his guard down.

“As a prize for discovering my origins, I'll tell you a bit more about my past. Do try not to die before I finish.”

Ehitruje's tone was graceful and elegant, but he couldn't hide the ugliness of his character. He smiled arrogantly, and Hajime glared at him.

"Do whatever you want," Hajime spat, firing Schlagen AA at him.

There was a loud crack...and Ehitruje's thunder dragon disappeared. Moving as fast as a bolt of lightning, it reappeared at Hajime's side.

"In my home world, humanity mastered exceptionally powerful magic. We had researched how to bring the stars under our dominion and channel the natural forces of the world. That should give you an idea of how advanced our civilization was."

This time Schlagen AA's bullet was only able to break through two layers of Ehitruje's barrier. Hajime had followed up with another shot from Donner, but even that second bullet failed to penetrate much farther.

Meanwhile, the thunder dragon that had come in from Hajime's flank let out a roar and tried to swallow him whole. However, Hajime brought his Crosswelts around and had them deploy a barrier.

Tch, not even my Guardian Talisman can completely neutralize this thing!

The Crosswelts' barrier creaked under the pressure of the dragon's jaws, as well as the gravity field around them. While they were deflecting the storm of lightning for now, in another ten seconds, his Guardian Talisman would become overloaded and the barrier would be destroyed.

He quickly reloaded Donner and aimed at the thunder dragon's mana-stone heart. But before he could fire, there was another crackle and it disappeared.

Damn, it's fast!

Hajime didn't even have time to catch his breath. The five dragons swapped places with perfect coordination, and next up he had to deal with the flame dragon bearing down from above.

"Unfortunately, it is the fate of all advanced civilizations to eventually be destroyed by their own hubris. My world was no exception."

The pure-white dimension they were fighting in suddenly turned into a giant television screen, showing a vision of space, with stars twinkling in the distance. Ehitruje was using restoration magic to recreate a scene from the past, it seemed. He looked over at one of the stars, which was emitting an erratic, unnatural glow.

But of course, Hajime didn't have the leeway to pay much attention. He darted through the air, taking aim at the fire dragon with Schlagen AA.

Not even Ehitruje's souped-up dragons would be able to survive a

hit from his prized rail cannon.

Unfortunately, just before he could pull the trigger, Ehitruje launched another Thunder God's Lance at him from just a few meters away...and the spear penetrated Schlagen AA's barrel right as he pulled the trigger.

The bullet managed to get out, but it was off course. The crimson streak shaved off half of the flame dragon's body, but that was all. The dragon then regenerated within seconds, while Hajime's Schlagen AA was destroyed, just like his Agni Orkan.

"You see, we eventually came to understand the underlying principles that govern the very universe. The things you call ancient magic—but what we referred to as the Universal Laws. Naturally, we were curious to see what wonders we could accomplish with this new power under our control, but of course—"

Ehitruje shrugged, his expression completely devoid of remorse. He looked more like a mildly disappointed child that had broken their own toy. The recreated vision of the past then showed people running as the earth split open and streams of unknown particles shot out of the fissures, destroying everything they touched. It looked like a scene straight out of hell.

The wind dragon flew over the vision and fired its lightning breath up at Hajime, who was above it. And at the same time, the stone dragon closed in from behind and the ice dragon from the left.

Hajime quickly manipulated his Orestes, hoping to redirect the wind dragon's breath. However, the ice dragon predicted his movements and froze his Orestes before he could open the portal.

"Pinpoint attacks, huh?" Hajime muttered.

Indeed, the ice dragon was capable of freezing any specific point as long as it knew the coordinates of the location. Bereft of his defenses, Hajime watched as tens of thousands of wind blades shredded his Orestes and swallowed him whole.

"Tch!"

Clicking his tongue, he quickly brought his Crosswelts over to create a barrier. He also ordered a few of his behemoth golems to start focusing on the dragons instead of the apostles to try to slow them down a little.

His crow golems were continuing their bombing run on Ehitruje, but the silver stars he kept firing out of his magic circle shot them down, turning them into nothing more than a pretty fireworks display.

Ehitruje barely even seemed to notice the attacks; he was too focused on reminiscing. He looked down nostalgically at the slideshow flashing on the floor and the walls of this artificial space.

"We took things too far. In the end, we destroyed the rules that governed the natural order of the universe. Humanity, and the very

star we lived on, was doomed to destruction, so only the chosen Enlightened could survive.”

Hajime had his Crosswelts deploy multiple barriers and started firing through his Orestes in all directions to keep Ehitruje’s dragons at bay.

In response, the five of them unleashed lightning, fire, wind, ice, and smoke breath attacks simultaneously.

The behemoths down below fired heavy barrages at the stone and ice dragons, but while the attacks could blow apart the dragons’ bodies, unless their cores were destroyed, they could just keep reforming. Still, those attacks managed to weaken the power of the dragons’ own attacks. They also slowed the two dragons down a little, granting Hajime an opportunity to try to aim for their cores.

However, the moment he did so, he felt a chill run down his spine. Turning around, he saw a ball of blue-white flame heading straight for him. His instincts warned him to get out, but he’d noticed too late. The fireball passed straight through the barrier and hit him square in the chest...

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

For the first time in this fight, Hajime actually screamed in pain. And honestly, considering what had hit him, it was hardly surprising.

That was Yue’s Divine Purgatory!

Thanks to the spirit magic in the spell, it would only impact the soul it was targeting and pass through most everything else. However, Ehitruje’s version of the spell was powerful enough to pass through even Hajime’s spatial magic barrier and harm not just him, but also his equipment, which wasn’t strictly part of him. Honestly, it was different enough that it was basically an entirely new spell.

Unable to maintain the barrier, Hajime dispelled it and tried to flee from the flames. He used a series of mana shock waves to push the fire back, but the damage was already done. Not only had his body been badly burned, but even his soul had taken a significant amount of damage. The pain was intense, the maximum amount of mana he could control had been lowered, and his recovery rate significantly reduced.

Naturally, the dragons tried to take advantage of his moment of weakness, and Hajime’s griffins had to use themselves as meat shields to protect him. While they were exploding one after another to keep him safe, he poured some mana into the bracelet on his right wrist. It was an artifact imbued with spirit and restoration magic, known as the Resurrection Bracer. Though it couldn’t perfectly heal the extreme damage he’d taken, it still started closing up his wounds quite quickly.

“The Enlightened was the name for the individuals who understood the true nature of the ancient magic everyone had learned

to use. We few escaped the destruction of our star by traveling to a different world.”

“What kind of freak sounds so happy about the destruction of their world?”

The screen below was showing a group of white-robed figures conversing with each other, and Ehitruje was looking down at it proudly.

Hajime glared at him, his expression almost bestial. He summoned Metzelei Disaster into his right hand and a Hyperion—his solar laser weapon—into his left. This Hyperion was a lot smaller than the one he’d used to kill the apostles back on Tortus, but it had to be to make it portable. Moreover, while its effective number of shots and overall range were lower, the actual power of the laser remained the same.

Hajime kept the fire and wind dragons at bay with his Gatling rail gun, and spread his Crosswelts out to target the lightning dragon. Meanwhile, he aimed Hyperion at the ice dragon that was being continually bombarded by the behemoths.

“You guys are starting to annoy me,” he said, firing Hyperion. A beam of solar light then swallowed up the ice dragon, and even the absolute zero temperatures that surrounded it wasn’t able to nullify the power of the laser. Its body and its mana stone were destroyed in an instant.

Getting annoyed with the behemoths’ constant attacks, the stone dragon quickly dove down toward them. It bathed them with its breath, petrifying a few dozen instantly, and then swallowed another one with its jaws. But while it was able to send the behemoths into disarray, that proved to be a fatal mistake. It wasn’t just Hajime’s Hyperions that could harness the power of artificial suns. The petrified behemoths’ horns started emitting sparks, and a few seconds later, they self-destructed.

Tiny suns bloomed in quick succession as the behemoths had released all of their energy at once. The stone dragon wasn’t able to withstand the force of those blasts and was swiftly obliterated.

As Hajime expected, Ehitruje responded to the destruction of his dragons by launching another Thunder God’s Lance at him. Or rather, another thirty, coming from all directions at once.

Unfortunately, while Hajime had predicted Ehitruje’s next attack, avoiding it still took every ounce of his concentration. He wasn’t able to save his weapons either, which were too bulky, and so both Hyperion and Metzelei Disaster got turned into pincushions.

“The world we arrived at was disgustingly primitive. Powerful beasts roamed the land, and the humans here hadn’t even developed primitive civilizations yet. Can you imagine? Humans, living in fear of nature!” Ehitruje exclaimed with a hint of outrage.

Wanting revenge for its two fallen comrades, the lightning dragon let out a furious roar and zapped its way over to Hajime at light speed.

“That’s what I was waiting for!” Hajime roared, redeploying his Crosswelts’ barriers. They weren’t there to protect him, but rather to trap the lightning dragon in here with him.

Inside the large space created by twelve Crosswelts’ barriers, Hajime and the lightning dragon crashed into each other. Hajime kept the dragon from biting down on him by summoning his shield artifact, Aideon, but the force of the dragon’s charge still pushed him all the way back to the barrier. Hajime then opened the barrier just enough to let him slip through, then plugged the hole with Aideon. As soon as that was done, the barrier started shrinking—and the few dozen spatial disruption grenades Hajime had dropped into the barrier before he left—exploded at once.

Twisted beyond all recognition, the lightning dragon also met its end.

“It’s true they were humans from a different world, but it was still unacceptable for them to be living like savages. And so, we decided to guide them to enlightenment. We slew the monsters that threatened them and led them to an age of peace and prosperity. Though we might have failed to create a perfect utopia once, that meant we understood better than anyone what a true utopia needed. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Upon seeing the images Ehitruje projected onto the screen below, all Hajime could think about was how utterly selfish, and foolish, this self-styled god was. It was true that the people on the screen were living simple, primitive lives, but at the same time, they were living in harmony with nature...and it was Ehitruje who had destroyed that harmony.

However, before Hajime could say as much, the wind dragon swallowed him whole.

“You turned into pure air?!”

Indeed, the wind dragon had dissolved its body of its own volition and turned into an invisible force of air. It had also waited for the exact moment that Hajime eliminated the lightning dragon to attack in order to ensure Hajime wouldn’t notice its approach. By the time he realized what was going on, there were already hundreds upon thousands of wind blades cutting at his skin.

Hajime used a full-powered Diamond Skin to try and protect himself, but the blades of wind were sharper than swords, and the pebbles kicked up by the gust moving faster than cannonballs. The wind blades cut at his less-protected limbs, while pebbles pelted the coat that protected his torso and vitals.

“Don’t...underestimate meeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Making sure to avoid just the lethal attacks and letting his Resurrection Bracer take care of all other injuries, Hajime pulled out his rail gun-enhanced Gatling pile bunker. As his blood sprayed all around him from the wind dragon’s torturous assault, Hajime gritted his teeth and pulled the trigger.

Compared to his other weapons, the pile bunker had the shortest range, but he was already inside the dragon’s body, so he didn’t need any. All he needed was power, which the pile bunker had in spades. The pile bunker started shooting and retracting its jet-black stake with blistering speed, and no mere storm was able to withstand such a ferocious barrage. It looked like Hajime was eating his way through the wind dragon’s body with the way he advanced.

Unsurprisingly, the wind dragon was soon devoured...and the last remaining dragon, the fire one, let out a roar of anger.

“There were those who couldn’t understand our glorious vision. Both among the primitives living here, and our own ranks,” Ehitruje continued. Hajime didn’t even need to ask to know that Ehitruje had likely eliminated anyone and everyone who’d disagreed with him.

Indeed, the vision below started showing Ehitruje killing even his close comrades if they dared to question him.

“After a few thousand years, this world finally reached an acceptable level of civilization. It was then, though, that those who had shared my vision began to give up their immortality. It was preposterous! What did they mean ‘that’s enough’? Had we kept on pushing that civilization further, it would have eclipsed even our former glorious society!”

Ehitruje sounded genuinely frustrated at what he clearly thought had been folly on his comrades’ part. That, more than anything, showed just how foolish he was.

As Hajime fought his way out of the wind dragon’s remnants, Ehitruje snapped his fingers and Hajime pitched forward. A block of shimmering platinum light was encasing his Gatling pile bunker. Ehitruje had used spatial magic to lock it in place, and the spell was powerful enough that cracks were appearing in the spatial magic ring on Hajime’s Guardian Talisman as it tried to neutralize it.

It was clear Ehitruje was still mad about the fact that his comrades had left him all that time ago.

Shit!

There was a hint of trepidation in Hajime’s expression. The Guardian Talisman did finally succeed in neutralizing the spatial magic holding his pile bunker in place, but it took a second too long.

Void Fissure explosions started closing in on him from all directions, each one far more powerful than any he’d seen thus far.

The force of the impact nearly knocked him unconscious, and various parts of his body were twisted or crushed quite painfully.

Coughing up blood, Hajime fell to the ground along with the shattered remnants of his spatial-magic-neutralizing ring. His Resurrection Bracelet hadn't been able to repair it in time, and it would take some time before it could heal him too.

"I don't even remember how many years I spent alone after that. All I know is that one day, I was looking down at the people offering me prayers and the grand civilization they had thanks to my efforts and thought—I want to destroy it all."

Hajime barely managed to activate Aerodynamic and make a platform for himself to stand on before he hit the ground. He was covered in small wounds, bleeding out of his eyes, nose, and ears, and panting heavily. He glared intensely at Ehitruje, but the so-called god was entranced by the vision of his past self laying waste to the civilization he'd helped create.

Since Ehitruje was in Yue's body, that rapt expression would have been quite captivating, except that Hajime was seething with rage because he knew Yue's body was being defiled.

"Don't you see? Everything in this world reveals its true beauty only in the moment it's destroyed. Nothing can match the pleasure of that moment of devastation. Trampling all over the people you've guided and protected for thousands of years was a joy like none other. Many of my memories have faded with time, but that moment where the people reached out to me for salvation, their despairing screams filling the streets, that one moment is burned vividly into my mind."

He snapped his fingers again, and Hajime leaped away on instinct, expecting another Thunder God's Lance. However, he'd guessed wrong. It was indeed an attack that was teleported in, but rather than a lightning spear, it was the fire dragon that was teleported.

Hajime's hair stood on end...and a second later, he felt a wave of heat and a powerful gravitational pull at his back. He didn't have to turn around to know the dragon had its jaws open right behind him.

There was no time to dodge. Even if there had been, Hajime's body wasn't able to move as fast as his mind anymore with all the injuries he'd sustained. The most he was able to do was bring one set of Crosswelts over to deploy a lone barrier.

The dragon's jaw clamped down, and Hajime was surrounded by flames on all sides.

"I don't know how many years I've been alive now, but the pleasure I felt when destroying everything is something I'll never forget, which is why I decided to turn this world into my playground. A stage for my games."

Ehitruje had finally finished reminiscing. He looked down at

Hajime, who was being swallowed up by the flames, and smiled.

The white-hot flames were compressed and heated to such an extreme level that they were melting through the Crosswelts themselves, despite the fact that they were made of the sturdiest material Hajime could create. Moreover, the gravity field in the fire dragon's maw was so strong Hajime couldn't move even with his Guardian Talisman neutralizing some of that gravity magic.

"Nnnnnngh!"

A small scream escaped through Hajime's gritted teeth. The worst thing about this predicament was that a tiny portion of the flames was able to slip through the barrier and hit Hajime. It seemed Ehitruje had enhanced these flames with spirit magic as well, though not as heavily as a proper Divine Retribution. However, the flames were focusing on his Resurrection Bracer, melting it into nothing.

Bearing the searing pain, Hajime swapped out the bullets in Donner's chamber for sealstone-tipped rounds. He'd used the majority of the sealstone he'd excavated for Shea's equipment, so he'd only had a bit left to make a precious few sealstone-tipped bullets.

Hajime had dubbed these Anti-Magic Bullets, and he pulled the trigger, firing one of them through the tiny hole in his barrier that he'd just made. A normal bullet would have melted immediately, but the magic-repelling sealstone bullet was able to shoot through the sea of flames and pierce the fire dragon's heart. Its mana stone then shattered into a dozen pieces, and the dragon began to disperse.

"This is all just a game, Irregular," Ehitruje stated as he snapped his fingers once more. The half-dispersed flames then started writhing like living creatures and snaked their way into the four Crosswelts forming Hajime's barrier. A second later, they exploded from the inside.

"Gah!"

The shock wave from the explosion and what little flecks of Divine Purgatory remained washed over Hajime. He quickly summoned a vial from his Treasure Trove, and with trembling fingers pulled out the stopper. But just before he could down the contents, a Thunder God's Lance shot the vial out of his hand.

"Dammit. That was my last bit of Ambrosia too," Hajime said in an annoyed voice.

Ehitruje's lips curled up into a grin.

"What do you think demons and beastmen are?" he asked suddenly, his voice coming from right behind Hajime.

Chills running down his spine, Hajime fired a blast out of the elbow portion of his prosthetic arm to turn him around at lightning speed. As he whirled around he took aim with Donner, but there was no one there. Instead, he felt a presence to his left. In his periphery, he

watched as Ehitruje caressed his Gatling pile bunker. A second later, Hajime's last bit of heavy weaponry crumbled to dust.

At point-blank range, it seemed Ehitruje could destroy objects before the creation magic ring on Hajime's Guardian Talisman could do anything.

"Tch!" Hajime clicked his tongue and fired Donner at Ehitruje, but the crimson streak shot through empty air.

Ehitruje once again reappeared behind Hajime. Only the smallest of the three rings of his halos was at his back now, and he had a claymore made of pure light in one hand.

I knew it, he can use that ability to instantly teleport things without portals—Heavenstep—on himself too, not just other things!

Hajime had already seen Ehitruje teleport Thunder God's Lance and his fire dragon, so he'd expected that the man would be able to use it on himself too. However, just knowing about it didn't make instantaneous teleportation any less of a threat.

Trusting his instincts, Hajime dashed forward at full speed, using his prosthetic limb to propel himself out of the claymore's range. Unfortunately, that wasn't enough.

"Agh!"

Hajime felt a searing pain shoot diagonally across his back, from shoulder to hip. He flipped around, blood spraying in all directions as he did so. Despite the distance, and the protection of his coat and Diamond Skin, Ehitruje had managed to cut him.

Looking over, Hajime saw that halfway up, the claymore's blade vanished through a ripple in space, its tip in a different spot a good distance away. The ripple glowed, the tip retracted, and a whole claymore was once again in Ehitruje's hand.

It seemed that the sword could stretch and squish freely, move through space, and also pass through everything but Hajime himself to hurt him directly. It was quite an amazing magic sword.

"Your god asked you a question. Answer, Irregular."

Ignoring him, Hajime sent a portion of his Crosswelts and Grim Reapers at Ehitruje. Of course, since they were busy dealing with the light apostles and the stars the magic circle was still shooting out, a lot of them were sacrificed because of this move, but Hajime had no other choice.

Seeing the golems rushing at him, Ehitruje simply narrowed his eyes and swept his hand in an arc. A second later, the space around everything except Hajime and Ehitruje fractured and split like a mirror being shattered. This was Thousand Sever, a spell that split a connected space into many separate ones. Though the spell had thousand in the name, the amount of spaces Ehitruje had created numbered well over ten thousand. In fact, there were so many spatial

fissures that Ehitruje damaged his own light apostles and spheres of light, but he also managed to destroy every single one of the Grim Reapers, as well as all of the Crosswelts except for the four around Hajime.

With the visions of the past gone, the room returned to pure white and the explosions of Hajime's artifacts filled the air. More and more light apostles and spheres of light continued to pour out of the still intact second and third rings of Ehitruje's magic circle in the distance.

He didn't look the slightest bit exhausted after having done that. In fact, he wasn't even breathing hard. It was clear that he didn't even consider Hajime a threat.

Meanwhile, Hajime was covered in wounds from head to toe, his black coat—which was tougher than any metal in the world—was tattered and soaked in blood. Even his white hair was matted with blood. There was no part of Hajime that wasn't mostly red. This was far from an even match.

Gritting his teeth in frustration, Hajime decided to answer Ehitruje's question in order to buy himself some time.

"Haaah... Haaah... Weren't they just the native races...already living here?"

"Wrong. Both demons and beastmen are the product of crossbreeding humans and monsters. They are races I, a god, created."

"Why would you bother...? Oh, I see. You were experimenting to try to create a vessel for yourself."

"Oho, you're quick on the uptake. Correct."

Ehitruje swung his claymore through the air and smiled. He went on to explain that his original body had been unable to withstand the ravages of time despite all of the magical technology at his disposal. Moreover, since his soul had grown larger after he'd converted the people's prayers into power, regular bodies could no longer hold him for long, hence why he'd tried to create a superior vessel.

With beastmen he'd focused on physical strength, while with demons he'd tried to make them as magically compatible as possible.

"Dragonmen and vampires ended up pretty good, but they weren't quite strong enough. The dragonmen I just gave up on halfway. It was fun watching those stuck-up honorable fools get betrayed by the people they said they'd protect, though."

Ehitruje shrugged as if he thought nothing of persecuting and exterminating an entire race. Thinking back to how much Tio had suffered because of this man, Hajime's rage grew.

Ehitruje gave him a knowing look, then smiled and continued, "There were a rare few like Alvaheit or the Liberators who possessed the proper affinity to serve as my vessel, but..."

"Affinity, huh?"

“They were all distant descendants of my former companions who strongly expressed some of those old genes. But while they would have been able to withstand bearing my soul for a little bit, they always ended up getting eroded before long.”

“So that’s why...you waited here in the Sanctuary. You were toying with the world to pass the time until a proper vessel appeared.”

“Exactly! And then it finally happened! Three hundred years ago, I finally found the perfect body!”

Ehitruje spread his arms wide to show off Yue’s body. In response, Hajime sneered.

“Is that why...you destroyed the vampire kingdom? You were pissed because you thought they’d killed your...precious vessel? Then you’re definitely no god,” he replied as he readied Donner and Schlag.

Ehitruje gave Hajime a cold smile and placed one hand on his chest. He knew how ironic his gratitude would come off as, which was exactly why he gave it.

“I have to thank you, Irregular. Not only did you find my vessel for me, but you also gave me such wonderful entertainment. As a reward, I’ll kill you with my own two hands.”

“I’d like to see you try!”

Ehitruje just laughed in response, and a second later, he vanished.

Hajime fired off all of Donner and Schlag’s bullets at once, and they passed through one of the Orestes he summoned to reappear behind him. As expected, that was where Ehitruje was as well. Having seen Ehitruje’s fight for this long, Hajime was now able to predict exactly when he would reappear and where. He’d spread his aim out a little though, just in case Ehitruje tried to dodge.

However, Ehitruje looked neither surprised nor at all worried. His arm blurred, and there was a series of platinum flashes as he cut through all the bullets faster than the eye could see.

Being able to aim for those bullets that had been accelerated with a rail gun with such pinpoint accuracy was unbelievable. No matter how fast you were or how good your reaction time was, that was something that exceeded physical limits. Body strengthening alone couldn’t get someone to this level, which of course meant something else had...and Hajime knew exactly what spell it was.

“Godspeed, huh?”

“Oh, is that what you named it? I like it. I think I’ll call it that as well.”

His expression grim, Hajime had his Crosswelts fire at random to try to distract Ehitruje for a second. Each of the Crosswelt’s bullets gave off powerful mana shock waves on impact, so he figured they would do something at least. However, a second before they reached Ehitruje, he vanished without a sound.

Once again trusting his instincts, Hajime canceled his Aerodynamic and let himself free-fall. A second later, two swords passed over his head like a pair of giant scissors.

“Two claymores, huh? I thought I recognized your fighting style even with one, but now I get it.”

“Is that truly surprising? There is no technique my apostles can use that I cannot, including swordsmanship. The original owner of this body may have been inept at close combat, but my skills are of course, *godlike*.”

Loath though Hajime was to admit it, Ehitrue wasn't just boasting. He was as good as he claimed, if not better.

Ehitrue closed in and launched a flurry of slashes that were so fast they looked like streaks even to Hajime, who was using Riftwalk. Worst of all, they were all capable of bypassing his defenses and hurting him directly.

“Uwooooooooooooooh!”

Using his prosthetic arm to fire off another propulsion blast, Hajime quickly leaped away. He then used a combination of Aerodynamic and Supersonic Step to keep making minute adjustments to his position and had his Crosswelts rapid-fire to try to slow Ehitrue down a little.

Ehitrue escaped the barrage and chased after Hajime with a series of short teleportation hops, smiling confidently all the while. Hajime kept on trying to counterattack by firing his bullets at impossible angles through his Orestes, but Ehitrue cut the bullets down with ease every single time.

Finally, Hajime showed the briefest of openings...and Ehitrue pounced.

“Hah! Looks like you've lost another one of your precious artifacts!”

Ehitrue sliced through a Crosswelt with blistering speed, and then also cut into Hajime's shoulder for good measure.

“How does it feel having your artifacts stripped away from you one by one? I beat you in a battle of numbers, and it seems you can't hold a candle to me in close combat either!”

“What, so you want me to fall into despair? That's almost as bad a joke as your entire existence.”

Irksome as it was, Ehitrue wasn't bothering to send his light apostles or star showers at Hajime right now. They were simply surrounding the battlefield, acting as a silent audience to watch as Ehitrue beat Hajime in a duel.

The situation was certainly quite desperate. Hajime's body was in tatters, his attacks couldn't reach Ehitrue, and he kept on taking more and more damage.

“How many more artifacts do you have? Or are you all out? If not, you better bring them out now or you’ll die! I’ll destroy them all for you and make you taste true despair!”

“Ngh!”

In the second it took Hajime to groan, Ehitruje swung another ten times. Hajime dodged them all purely on instinct, but his evasion wasn’t perfect, so the blades grazed him here and there.

All of his Orestes were destroyed, so Hajime hurriedly pulled out a bunch of grenades and scattered them everywhere with a mana shock wave in a last-ditch attempt to get Ehitruje off of him. Ehitruje cut down only the grenades nearby enough to hurt him and let the rest explode harmlessly in the distance. As always, he emerged unhurt.

Smoke and flames filled the battlefield, but they did nothing to hamper Ehitruje’s vision. Any time Hajime moved, Ehitruje appeared right next to him, attacked, vanished, and reappeared. It was like fighting a specter. With how quickly Ehitruje was teleporting around, Hajime felt like he was being attacked from all directions at once. He tried his best to pinpoint Ehitruje’s movements, but he couldn’t.

Slowly but surely, like someone stuck in an inevitable checkmate scenario, Hajime was stripped of his trump cards and pressured into a corner.

“What’s wrong? Not going to use your god-killer artifact? If you pray hard enough, you might get a lucky hit in, you know?”

“Shut up!”

It was just empty bravado at this point. Hajime didn’t have the strength to formulate a proper response to Ehitruje’s taunts. Because of how long he’d kept his Overload going, and because of how much blood had run into them, Hajime’s eyes were starting to lose focus.

“Hmm... Seeing as you’re not bringing out any new artifacts, you really must be at the end of your rope... I suppose it’s time, then.”

Ehitruje snapped his fingers, making twenty Thunder God’s Lances appear next to him. They lined up in a row and shot forward at regular intervals. However, much to Ehitruje’s chagrin, Hajime managed to just barely avoid or shoot down the core of each of them.

His survival instincts were second to none, but unfortunately, his resistance could only go on for so long. Though Hajime was able to keep himself safe, he couldn’t do the same for his Crosswelts, which took direct hits and exploded, shooting lightning everywhere.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Screaming in pain as the explosions hit him, Hajime crashed into the ground, white smoke rising from his body. He bounced a few times before coming to a stop facedown on the white floor. There was a huge puddle of blood underneath him, and his body was covered in burns and cuts. Parts of his limbs had been so badly burned even the

bone was blackened. He looked half-dead already.

Ehitruje alighted soundlessly to the ground in front of him. He raised one claymore, looking at Hajime like a toy he no longer cared for. This was the end. But before he could swing it down, Hajime's fingers twitched.

"Oh?"

Ehitruje looked down at him, impressed. Despite how much he was bleeding, Hajime still managed to struggle to his knees.

"Despite having faced the full might of a god, you still possess the determination to rise to your feet once more?"

"I'll say it as many times...as I have to... You're...no god. In fact...you're...ugh...even weaker than the regular people fighting back on...Tortus..."

"Really, petty insults? Just look at the state you're in."

Ehitruje shook his head in mild exasperation. It was true that Hajime was so weak that it looked like his pulse might stop at any second. Thus, from Ehitruje's perspective, it really did just seem like Hajime was trying to get in one last cutting remark. It was unbecoming of someone who'd fought so hard, at least to Ehitruje, but Hajime didn't stop talking. Even though every word made him cough up blood, he said his piece.

"It's true...that you're powerful... I've never felt this close to death...since I left the abyss..."

"Don't you realize you're contradicting yourself? If I'm—"

"But that's all."

Hajime's words were dripping with conviction. Though his consciousness was hazy, his eyes were still burning with light. His will hadn't died out just yet. And as he spoke, Hajime's voice grew stronger and stronger.

"You lack...drive... The desire to overwhelm your opponent. That's why you...can't shake my resolve... You're not scary at all."

"Stubborn to the end, I see."

Ehitruje looked disappointed. On the other hand, Hajime looked off into the distance, the same way Ehitruje had when reminiscing about the past. He thought back to all the people he'd met in this world, then spoke in a kind tone that didn't seem fitting for this harsh battlefield.

"I know of a girl who, despite being a member of the weakest race, was able to challenge the world's greatest trials thanks to the strength of her will."

Though she'd cried the whole way through the Reisen Gorge, she had been determined to stay with Hajime, and so the young rabbit girl had forged on.

"I know of a girl who continued moving forward despite tasting

the ultimate despair.”

Even though no one else had believed Hajime had survived falling down that hole, she'd never given up hope. She'd kept searching for the boy she loved, and after she found him, she'd changed even her body in order to gain enough strength to support him.

“I know of a woman willing to use her own body as a shield to protect those she cares about.”

Hajime had lost track of the number of times that wise, kind dragonwoman had saved them all. Though she normally played the fool, she was always there for her comrades when they needed her most.

“I know of a girl who had the strength to stay with her friend even in the face of death.”

Even though she always prioritized the feelings of others, even though she actually hated fighting, she was so kind that she was willing to stand on the front lines for her friends.

“I know of a woman who stuck to her own beliefs even as the world around her changed and her naivety was exposed time and time again.”

She'd been scared, hurt, worried, and even unsure at times, but in the end, she had decided that this was who she wanted to be. She was also the one and only teacher who'd given Hajime pause and caused him to reconsider his own beliefs.

“I know of a young girl who stood in the line of fire to stop her stupid father, even though she had no power of her own.”

Though she was only four, she'd had courage even after being kidnapped, and even stopped the rampaging monster of the abyss before he'd taken things too far.

“But most of all, I know of a girl who's still fighting, even though her body has been taken over.”

Hajime had absolute faith in Yue's strength. And though he had been utterly dominated until now and was on the verge of death, his piercing *human* gaze still gave Ehitruje pause. He took an involuntary step backward, not even realizing that he'd been mentally overpowered. Hajime's gaze was as hard as iron, as calm as a still pool, and burning with a will so vast it seemed all-encompassing.

“Even the monsters of the abyss at least had bloodlust in them, but you don't even have that. You're empty. You've been empty ever since that moment you destroyed everything you and your comrades built together.”

Hajime was back on his feet now. He wasn't staggering either, his stance was firm, Donner and Schlag ready and waiting in his hands.

“I was listening to your story. It taught me that you're a spoiled brat who failed to learn anything from the past or from the warnings

of your comrades, and got pissed when they left you all alone, so you threw a tantrum.”

When Ehitruje’s companions had said “that’s enough,” they must have thought that civilization would be able to thrive just fine without them and that the people of the old world were no longer needed. And so, in order to prevent the tragedy that had happened to their universe, they chose to live and die as humans rather than as gods.

They’d tried to warn Ehitruje as well, but in his hubris, he’d ignored the warnings and eliminated dissenters by force.

Everlasting life and the glory of the past were the only things that made up the being known as Ehitruje. That was why he could never truly connect with another being, and why he’d been defeated by solitude. No matter how powerful he became, no matter how long he lived, in the end, he was just a child. And that was why—

“Hmph! Are you trying to rile me up with such petty taunts? You’re out of trump cards, so just accept your defeat. You fought well, I admit, but you won’t be able to hit me with that god-killer artifact.”

Hajime knew his words wouldn’t reach Ehitruje. After all, Ehitruje’s comrades hadn’t been able to reach him either.

Hajime moved one leg back, lowered his center of gravity, and brought Donner and Schlag up.

“That’s right, I can’t defeat you,” he said, agreeing with Ehitruje. But then, he added, “As I am now, at least!”

A second later, a huge amount of mana spiraled up from him. He’d multiplied his stats by five once again, even though he was already using Overload. The crimson tornado of mana that spiraled up from him was so powerful it obliterated all of the light apostles and light stars directly above him and even destroyed a good chunk around the raging tornado. At that point, even Ehitruje was forced to teleport away.

“Impossible. How did you get so much stronger?”

For the first time, Ehitruje looked a bit nervous. That left him open for a second, and Hajime disappeared and reappeared behind him. He had, for the first time, moved so fast that Ehitruje hadn’t been able to follow him.

Donner fired with a bang at the exact same moment that Ehitruje activated Heavenstep to teleport away. But as he did so, he gasped in surprise.

“What?!”

And of course he was shocked, since Hajime had appeared right in front of him using the very same teleportation technique instead of any high-speed movement.



“Did you just use Heavenstep?!”

“What made you think instantaneous teleportation was something only you could do?” Hajime asked as he quickly fired off six of his Living Bullets—which were capable of changing their own trajectory—at Ehitruje.

“Ngh!”

Ehitruje tried to cut them down while using Godspeed, but he saw them change direction too late, so he quickly crossed his twin claymores in front of him to block instead.

There was a shock wave as all six of them impacted, and Ehitruje was blown backward. Indescribable rage welled up within him as he realized he’d actually been pushed back, but Hajime’s offense was far from over. He once again teleported behind Ehitruje and fired off another round of Living Bullets.

“I’ve seen through your petty trick. You’re swapping places with other artifacts!”

Ehitruje was indeed correct. Any time one of the bullet casings that littered the floor disappeared, Hajime appeared in their place.

It wasn’t just his bullets Hajime had turned into artifacts, but their shells as well. Those cartridges were made of metal, after all, meaning they could be enchanted with magic. He’d dubbed them Exchange Cases, and they were imbued with evolution and spatial magic to allow them to swap places with an origin point, which in this case was a jewel embedded into the shoulder portion of Hajime’s prosthetic arm.

Ehitruje immediately took flight, bringing the battle back into the air. There were too many casings on the ground, so he couldn’t predict which ones could be teleported to, and if they could all be used, then he wouldn’t be able to tell which one Hajime would utilize next.

Unfortunately for him, the air wasn’t safe. Hajime pulled Schlag’s trigger, and a bullet whizzed past Ehitruje’s head. The moment it was behind him, Hajime teleported to it...for he had Exchange Bullets as well as Exchange Cases.

The moment Hajime appeared behind Ehitruje, he once again fired Living Bullets out of Donner.

Ehitruje dodged out of the way with Godspeed, then swung his distance-ignoring claymore at Hajime. His sword sliced Hajime in half, but then another Hajime fired off another shot from Donner from behind the first’s body.

“An illusion?! Impossible, how can you deceive my eyes?!”

Ehitruje once again fled, using Heavenstep to move to the side as he watched the fake Hajime dissipate into nothing, while the real Hajime was, of course, left unscathed.

Ehitruje launched a series of slashes, all of them ignoring space and distance, but they all passed right through Hajime. One sliced his neck, but then the real Hajime once again appeared safe and sound a few dozen centimeters behind the illusion. Another sliced his arm, but that also vanished and was replaced by his real arm.

Hajime was using one of the special artifacts in his prosthetic arm, Ghost Projector. It was a small jewel imbued with spirit magic that allowed him to project astral bodies. All he was doing was putting a copy of his soul into a visual illusion of himself, but the presence and mana it emitted felt completely real.

Used in conjunction with Hajime's extremely tricky and fast movements while teleporting all over the place with teleporting bullets, it was more than enough to confuse Ehitruje. All the would-be god could slice through was afterimages and illusions. To make matters worse, all of the empty cartridges on the ground were now floating into the air. They all had gravity magic in them, allowing them to move around the air like shooting stars. And naturally, Hajime could teleport to any one he chose.

"You bastard, you were hiding some of your trump cards still?!"

Ehitruje's voice was laced with a hint of panic. It seemed even he hadn't expected Hajime to keep a few trump cards in reserve after being driven that far into a corner.

No matter how well you planned something like this, when a normal person was put in a situation where they were a hair's breadth away from death, they'd throw their plans out the window and use everything at their disposal. It took unbelievable mental conditioning to not do that.

Hajime's unbreakable will and persistence were terrifying enough to put fear into even Ehitruje's heart...

"Uwooooooooooooooh!"

With a spirited battle cry, Hajime pushed his offense even further. The tables had turned completely. Hajime teleported around so fast that it looked like he was in every place at once, firing from all directions.

"This won't change a thing! When will you realize your struggles are in vain?!"

Ehitruje used Heavenstep and Godspeed in conjunction to match Hajime's speed. He swung his platinum claymores in all directions, cutting through the bullets heading for him. But unlike before, this was no longer a one-sided match. No, this was a true battle between gods.

"What? You've nullified my Godspeed? And you're reading my movements? How are you able to process all that infor—that Demon Eye!"

Using Godspeed didn't require that Ehitruje be close to his target, but if he wanted to swing his claymores while using it, then he did. After all, if his weapons didn't touch his enemy, they couldn't do anything. In that case, what Hajime had done was simply create a zone around him where Godspeed was nullified.

The restoration magic ring on his Guardian Talisman had the power to defend against Revival Reversal—the spell that brought back old injuries—but it also had an Hour Crystal fragment in it, which prevented time from being messed with in Hajime's immediate vicinity.

Moreover, Hajime had finally begun to analyze Ehitruje's swordplay. All of the evolution magic put into his Demon Eye let him analyze information at a prodigious rate, and he'd also enchanted it with foresight, which helped him predict Ehitruje's movements. It wasn't quite as powerful as Shea's Future Sight, but it was still giving him a split-second advantage.

All the time Hajime had spent studying and dissecting Ehitruje's fighting style was finally beginning to pay off. At long last, it was time for him to go all out and bring this wannabe god down. He started alternating the timings of his attacks, targeting the gaps in Ehitruje's perception, and kept his movement patterns random to make his Ghost Projections more effective. By reading Ehitruje's swordplay and teleportation habits, Hajime was able to predict where he would show up next and fire off counters right as he got there.

Hajime's close combat skills had reached even greater heights than before. Now it was Ehitruje's attacks that weren't connecting, while Hajime's started getting closer and closer to landing a decisive blow.

It was clear from his expression that Ehitruje was getting steadily more frustrated. He'd started sending his light spheres and light apostles at Hajime, which was proof that he was feeling pressured. The barrage of apostles and stars scattered Hajime's Exchange Cases, reducing his teleportation options and delaying his movements slightly.

"Hah, I've got you now!" Ehitruje shouted, swinging one of his claymores down at Hajime. There was nowhere for him to dodge, and since Ehitruje's claymores passed through anything that wasn't Hajime himself, he was confident Hajime wouldn't be able to block... And yet, there was a loud metallic clang as his claymore impacted against Schlag's gun barrel.

"What?!" he shouted, shocked. It made no sense. No object should have been able to stop his claymore. Thus, he swung his second one down as well, and Hajime blocked that one with Donner.

Sensing danger, Ehitruje immediately teleported away to gain

some distance.

“How? How are you able to block my swords?”

“It just took a little Transmutation, that’s all.”

Ehitruje’s claymores used spirit magic to pass through everything except for the soul of their intended target. With that in mind, the solution had been simple; Hajime had just given his guns copies of his soul, the same way he’d given his organic golems fake souls. In doing so, he’d tricked the claymores into thinking the guns were also him, and therefore targets that shouldn’t be passed through.

By the time Ehitruje had figured all of that out, Hajime had teleported right beside him...and he could feel his Godspeed being blocked.

Hajime took aim at his head and heart with Donner and Schlag. Though Ehitruje could have teleported away, his pride wouldn’t allow him to run. Instead, he tried to cut down the bullets like he had before, not even realizing that this attack was a feint.

His focus solely on the gun barrels, Ehitruje was caught by surprise when Hajime didn’t pull the trigger. A second later, he felt a sharp pain in his abdomen.

Letting out a groan of pain, Ehitruje doubled over as he was sent flying a few dozen meters back. Hajime had roundhouse kicked him. And with his stats amplified this much, even a simple kick had as much power as his pile bunkers. Still, Hajime’s kick shouldn’t have been able to pierce Ehitruje’s barriers when even his strongest rail gun rifle couldn’t. And yet, Ehitruje had taken damage.

“You...” Ehitruje muttered in surprise.

“Looks like it worked.”

There was a trickle of blood spilling from the corner of Ehitruje’s mouth. Hajime’s kick had gone through his barrier and damaged him directly.

Stunned, Ehitruje looked down at Hajime’s boots, which were still emitting crimson shock waves.

“Impossible...you completely analyzed my barrier in the middle of battle?!”

Ehitruje’s barrier was a powerful spell that combined multiple ancient magics to create the ultimate shield. Aside from overwhelming brute force, the only other way to break through it would be to use a similarly complex combination of ancient magic to counteract the barrier’s effects.

Indeed, that was exactly what Hajime had done. In the middle of battle, he’d created an improvised artifact capable of nullifying Ehitruje’s barrier, proving that it was his abilities as a master synergist that made Hajime so fearsome, not the ancient magic he’d acquired or the skills he’d absorbed from monsters.

Of course, making improvised artifacts imbued with ancient magic was only possible thanks to Transcendence, the final derivative skill of Limit Break. There had only been a handful of people in the history of Tortus to ever acquire the skill, and among them, Hajime was the only one who was also capable of using all seven types of ancient magic. There would likely never again be anyone capable of transmuting ancient magic into artifacts on the fly the way Hajime could.

Ehitruje had foolishly assumed mass-producing weapons was where a synergist's true strength lay, but that was only one part of what made synergists so powerful. A synergist's greatest asset was their adaptability.

Sparks ran down the length of Donner's and Schlag's barrels as Hajime took aim once more.

"I think I'll call these Godpiercer Bullets."

Hajime had reformed his ammunition to be capable of penetrating Ehitruje's barrier. Now every single one of his bullets was a deadly threat, capable of dealing heavy damage. And more importantly, this also meant that Hajime's god-killer artifact could now easily reach Ehitruje.

Upon realizing that, Ehitruje instinctively took a few steps back...and when he realized he was cowering, he glared at Hajime. His furious expression ruined Yue's good looks.

"Damn you, Irregular! Just how much were you holding back until now?!"

Ehitruje wasn't just referring to the new artifacts Hajime had started creating. Hajime's stats were also much higher than they had been a few minutes ago. That was the reason a simple kick had been able to actually damage Ehitruje.

Overload was the strongest version of Limit Break as far as stat increases went, and there shouldn't have been any way of multiplying one's stats further short of sacrificing their own life force. But somehow, Hajime's stats were over tenfold what they had been at the start, and he looked healthier than ever.

In other words, when he'd first activated Overload and told Ehitruje he wouldn't be holding back, that too had been a lie.

"You must be pretty stupid if you actually believed anything your opponent said," Hajime stated with a shake of his head, then went on the offensive.

Of course, Ehitruje thought that first activation of Overload had been a bluff, but in truth, Hajime had actually used Overload there. What was increasing his stats even further now was the same artifact he'd handed out to every soldier fighting for Tortus back on the surface. His own Last Seele. There was no way he'd make an artifact that powerful for other people and not keep one for himself.

Naturally, he'd ingested a few CheatMates as well.

By combining his Last Seele with his own innate Overload skill, Hajime had been able to magnify his stats beyond what would normally be possible. That was what was allowing him to match Ehitrue's godlike specs.

At the level they were fighting at, the light apostles and spheres Ehitrue's magic circle was mass-producing could barely even do anything to intervene. Hajime's high-speed movement and constant teleportation, combined with his highly polished gun-kata fighting techniques, forced Ehitrue to focus all of his attention on close combat, not giving him time to do anything else.

As they fought, Ehitrue noticed one other anomaly.

"Your wounds, they're..."

Indeed, they were healing at an unbelievably fast rate. The numerous burns and lacerations that had covered Hajime's body were mostly gone, and his breathing was steady. At first, Ehitrue thought Hajime must have made another healing artifact, but he didn't sense any restoration magic being used. There was only one other explanation for why Hajime was healing so fast.

"So you lied about that vial of Ambrosia being your last one too," he said with a frown.

"Well, it was the last one in my Treasure Trove."

Of the two Hajime had left, he'd put one inside a capsule and swallowed it so that it was sitting in his stomach. Eventually, his stomach acids had melted the capsule and the healing liquid had started spreading through Hajime's system.

Claymores and guns clashed, sending sparks flying everywhere. His eye twitching with barely suppressed rage, Ehitrue asked, "Why save it for so long?"

"To make sure I would win. From the very start, I knew not to underestimate your strength."

Hajime's god-killer artifact could only be used once. Thus, he couldn't afford to use it until he knew the full extent of Ehitrue's capabilities. In order to make sure his trump card would hit, he needed to be sure he'd seen all of Ehitrue's powers and devised suitable counters for them. What Ehitrue had been trying to do Hajime for fun, Hajime had also been trying to do to Ehitrue, though for entirely different reasons.

In truth, Ehitrue's strength had still surpassed Hajime's expectations, and he'd felt the specter of death looming over him more than once during their fight, but in exchange for most of his artifacts and a great deal of pain, Hajime had finally succeeded in making Ehitrue show off all of his skills. Meanwhile, he'd managed to preserve the most important of his own trump cards.

“If you’re so certain you haven’t underestimated me, let’s see if you can handle this! Behold the full might of a god!” Ehitruje shouted, creating a series of spatial explosions all around him. It was a desperate attack, one hardly befitting someone who claimed to be a god.

Hajime quickly neutralized the explosions near him with a series of mana shock waves and used Diamond Skin and Aideon to block the ones that got through. Though he was able to avoid taking any damage, he was still forced to stop moving for a few seconds. And in that time, Ehitruje used Heavenstep to return to the center of his three-ring halo.

A second later, there was an explosion of platinum light as the halo that was also a magic circle began to glow. The three rings also started to pulse, growing in size. Once they were over a thousand meters in diameter, the second and third rings started rotating in reverse.

The light apostles and spheres started flooding toward Hajime to try to slow him down while Ehitruje intoned, “This is the true divine might! The light of destruction that not even my brethren could stand against! There’s nowhere for you to run, Irregular!”

Platinum light filled the room, blotting out Hajime’s vision. The wave of light that spread over a kilometer wide made its way to him like an avalanche of epic proportions. This was Ehitruje’s ultimate trump card, the move he’d used to overturn the game board whenever things weren’t going his way. And yet, in the face of such destructive might, Hajime simply grinned.

“Well, if I can’t run, I’ll just punch right through it.”

He took a resolute step toward the almighty light. He then rocketed forward at tremendous speed, turning into a crimson blur, and took out yet another artifact that he’d kept in reserve. This artifact looked like a huge lance, but its pointed tip had spiral grooves in it, and it was rotating at high speed like a drill. The tip was also quite wide like an umbrella, covering most of Hajime’s body.

This was Hajime’s lance drill artifact, Laobenschiram. He’d used the majority of his remaining sealstone to coat the surface of the drill, and the superdense alloy that made up the rest of its volume was enchanted with all seven types of ancient magic, making it the strongest offensive and defensive artifact in his possession. It had the power to drill right through anything, whether it was physical or magical.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The light was so powerful that it stripped away the sealstone coating in seconds, and though the restoration magic in the artifact repaired it nigh instantly and spatial magic protected Hajime from as

much of the impact as possible, he still took a serious amount of damage from the shock waves that erupted as his drill slammed into the tsunami of light. Many of his wounds reopened and blood spurted in all directions as slivers of light grazed him. Even his internal organs took a good amount of damage, and he coughed up blood as he screamed.

Hajime's muscles tore, his bones cracked, and his skin was ripped off. But even so, he kept charging forward. Screaming as he went, he didn't let the light slow him down for even a second. It didn't matter how overwhelming Ehitruje's might was; Hajime would push through it with sheer force. That was how he'd overcome all obstacles in his path so far, and he wasn't planning on stopping now.

"Your power's mine!" Hajime shouted, and a second later, Laobenschiram began to glow with a platinum light.

"Impossible! This is the pinnacle of god's might! How could you possibly have appropriated it for yourself?!"

Laobenschiram had been enchanted with spirit and metamorphosis magic to make it half-alive, just like Hajime's golems. Its sole purpose was to absorb whatever ultimate final attack Ehitruje might attempt and make that power its own. While it had been drilling through Ehitruje's light, it had also been breaking it down and analyzing it with evolution magic. And now, Hajime had enchanted Laobenschiram with Ehitruje's own power.

This was the culmination of Hajime's magical talent and synergist skill. Plunder Transmutation. The ability to analyze an attack he was hit by and immediately incorporate that same attack into his own artifacts.

Normally, something like that would have been impossible, but the Transcendence skill combined with his massively boosted stats had allowed Hajime to do the impossible in just seconds. Creation magic was all about creating new artifacts. And though Hajime had possessed no affinity for the other six types of ancient magic, creation magic had been different.

Creation magic was practically made for synergists, and it synergized with Transmute in a way nothing else did. It was the one field of magic that Hajime had any natural talent for, and he'd utilized that talent to its fullest. Thus, right now Ehitruje's Divine Will was being countered with his very own Divine Will.

"Ah!" Ehitruje gasped in surprise as his light was destroyed, and Hajime glared at him.

Though he couldn't hear Hajime from this distance, he could tell the young man was saying,

"I have you now."

Fear seeped into his every pore, and he instinctively tried to run

away. Ehitruje activated Heavenstep, but of course, Hajime wasn't about to let him get away. He used Laobenschiram's gravity magic to charge forward at breakneck speed, then fired Donner and Schlag in rapid succession.

A second later, the space around Ehitruje began to twist and warp. These were yet another of Hajime's special bullet types, the Spatial Distortion Bullets. They possessed no offensive power, but they destabilized the space around where they exploded. Heavenstep required extremely precise spatial coordinates to work, which Hajime was fully aware of, so these bullets did a perfect job of preventing Ehitruje from using it.

Moreover, Ehitruje wasn't capable of using Godspeed either because Hajime had also fired Delay Bullets at him. These bullets were made with fragments of the Hour Crystal and prevented anything they hit from using time manipulation.

"Ngh! You still have other artifacts left?!" Ehitruje roared, his expression stiffening.

Hajime kicked Laobenschiram's handle, launching it like a ballista bolt. It shot past Ehitruje and slammed into the three-ring halo behind him. The halo then began to flicker, and Ehitruje turned back just in time to see Laobenschiram blast apart a chunk of it, causing the light of destruction to stop pouring out of it. The monster of the abyss had completely and utterly defeated god's strongest spell.

Shocked, Ehitruje turned back to Hajime. Hajime's glare pierced right through him, and Ehitruje swung his twin claymores down with all of his might. He was well and truly desperate now.

Unfortunately, his twin blades cut through only air.

"An...illusion?!"

The image of Hajime he'd sliced through broke apart like a pane of shattered glass, and Ehitruje's eyes went wide.

Until now, Hajime's illusions had only worked when he was within a foot or so of them, and Ehitruje had swung over such a wide area that even if the Hajime he was seeing was an illusion, he should have hit the real him too. But this time, the real Hajime was a good few meters behind his illusion.

Looking closer at the shattered illusion, Ehitruje noticed that this one had a small blue crystal floating at its center. This was another of Hajime's artifacts, the Ghost Doll. It augmented the Ghost Projections Hajime could make by increasing their effective range.

By the time Ehitruje realized he'd been tricked, it was too late.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

In his shock, he'd stopped moving for a second, which was a fatal mistake.

With a spirited battle cry, Hajime charged at Ehitruje. The fingers

of his prosthetic arm extended forward, looking like a skeleton's bony digits. He grabbed Ehitruje by the collar and slammed him into the three-ring halo, which was already beginning to fall apart. The force of the impact shattered it completely, and Hajime continued his charge, heading straight for the ground. His clawed metallic fingers kept a tight hold on Ehitruje, keeping him from escaping. Hajime even shot out tiny spikes from his fingertips, trapping Ehitruje's upper half in a makeshift iron maiden. He also shot a spirit-magic shock wave out of his arm to shake up Ehitruje's soul and used spatial magic to trap him in place even more securely.

"How dare you, lowly human?! Unhand me!" Ehitruje screamed. "Shut up and die."

Ehitruje tried to cast a spell, but Hajime unleashed a superdense blast of pure mana at him, disrupting the flow of mana in his body and interrupting his attempts to cast. Hajime had retrofitted his mana cannon into his prosthetic arm for this very purpose.

Finally, the two of them hit the ground, and there was a thunderous roar as cracks spread out across the pure-white space. The two of them had slammed into the surface like a meteorite, and both of them were momentarily stunned by the impact. However, it was Hajime who recovered first. Straddling Ehitruje, he took aim with Donner. A single bullet wrapped in an overpowering sky-blue aura appeared in the air. He had reshaped the god-killing dagger he'd received from Miledi into a bullet. Supposedly, it had the power to harm god and only god's soul.

Hajime could sense Ehitruje's trembling through his prosthetic arm. Though Ehitruje glared at Hajime, there was more fear in his eyes than anger.

Hajime spun Donner's chamber, loading the god-slayer bullet. He then pressed the revolver's barrel against Ehitruje's chest.

"Let's see how you like the taste of the god-slayer artifact the Liberators made while drunk off their ass. This is checkmate, you bastard."

"Wait—"

The sound of a single gunshot reverberated throughout the pure-white dimension. At long last, Hajime had hit god with his trump card.

Ehitruje's body bucked, and after a small moan, he closed his eyes and went limp. In the distance, the three-ring halo dissipated into particles of light.

Silence filled the room, and after a minute that felt like an eternity, Yue's eyes opened. She looked up at Hajime, who was covered in wounds from head to toe, and said, "Too bad, Irregular."

"Agh!"

A second later, Hajime's prosthetic arm shattered, and he was sent flying, blood spraying from a new hole in his chest.

Chapter V: From Run of the Mill to King of the Hill

A loud rumbling noise resounded as one side of the only building in this space, the pyramid with a throne atop it, crumbled. Buried in the rubble, Hajime coughed up a lungful of blood. His face was twisted in pain.

A few seconds later, there was a series of clattering noises as pieces of metal hit the ground. They were the remains of Hajime's prosthetic arm.

"Ngggh!"

Through sheer force of will, Hajime lifted Donner. Blood was running into his eye, making it difficult for him to see properly. His vision was coated in a layer of red.

In the distance, Ehitrue got to his feet and glided forward, appearing weightless. As he drew close, he snapped his fingers, and Hajime felt a sharp pain in his right hand. He felt Donner get knocked out of his fingers, and looking down, he saw that all five of them were bent at painful angles, clearly broken. As Donner spun through the air, it was enveloped in platinum light and crumbled to dust. There was also a small *plink* as his Treasure Trove fell off his broken finger and hit the ground.

"Well played, Irregular. That was well played indeed. I'm impressed you actually managed to hit me with your ultimate trump card. Unfortunately for you, it seems it wasn't sufficient to defeat me."

"....."

Ehitrue touched down on the ground and started walking slowly toward Hajime. Normally, his feet made no noise when he walked, but now he was purposely letting his footsteps echo loudly. In his hands was a necklace, Hajime's Guardian Talisman. He'd stolen it when he'd sent Hajime flying. He held it up for Hajime to see, then destroyed it with a flash of platinum light. With each step he took, he destroyed another one of Hajime's precious artifacts. He brought Schlag, Laobenschiram, Aideon, and even all of Hajime's scattered Exchange Cases to him with Heavenstep and destroyed them one by one.

"You must be confused. Why is it that I'm still alive after being hit by god-slaying concept magic, you wonder? Heh..."

"....."

Ehitrue gave Hajime an amused look, but Hajime didn't respond.

Instead, he simply slumped against the wall, looking as if he was too exhausted to even speak. His eyes were still open and he was looking at Ehitruje, but his gaze was empty and there was no fighting spirit left in it. It looked like he might pass out at any moment.

Ehitruje loved seeing him in such a pathetic state. His fear and panic gone, he smiled at Hajime and explained, "Your concept magic may have worked on me a few thousand years ago, but my very existence has continued to evolve thanks to all of the faith people have placed in me. The sheer level of divinity I possess is too much for a mere god-slaying concept to destroy me. I have reached far greater heights than just that of a god."

"....."

Ehitruje stopped right in front of Hajime. Then, he raised one foot, showing off a completely unblemished leg.

"Though I admit I wasn't absolutely certain your concept magic would fail. Besides, even if this body does have the power to repair itself, it would have been unforgivable for my divine being to be injured even in the slightest, so I had no intention of taking that bullet of yours," Ehitruje stated as he brought his foot down, crushing Hajime's Treasure Trove. It leaked a bit of light as it shattered, its magic depleted. "You should be proud, Irregular. No one else has managed to make me panic before."

"....."

Hajime had now lost every single one of his artifacts except for his Demon Eye. Ehitruje looked haughtily down at him, and though he was smiling, his eyes still burned with a fierce rage. It galled him to no end that a mere human had managed to scare him, even if only for a moment. He had never felt such humiliation in his life, and it was only his pride that kept him from lashing out like a kid throwing a tantrum.

However, Hajime continued to remain unresponsive. His left eye finally closed, and though his Demon Eye was still open, it was hidden behind his eye patch, so it was hard to tell. He wasn't moving at all either, and it really seemed like he was dead.

Still, Ehitruje wasn't going to let him die that easily. He needed to return the humiliation he'd felt tenfold or he wouldn't be satisfied. Though he'd managed to keep himself from throwing a tantrum, he was still an immature brat. Thus, he knelt in front of Hajime so that his face was at the same level. He then caressed Hajime's thigh gently.

"Agh!"

A second later, he fired a bullet of light through it, shattering bone and opening a hole in Hajime's thigh. Hajime's body twitched and he let out a groan of pain. Ehitruje then cupped Hajime's chin with his bloody fingers and lifted his head. Smiling sweetly to hide his

rage, he brought his face close enough to Hajime's that he could kiss him if he wanted to. However, just before their lips touched, he moved his face to the side and leaned even farther forward to whisper directly into Hajime's ear.

"I'm going to destroy everything and everyone you ever cared about. All of your friends who came into the Sanctuary with you, all of those idiots fighting on the ground below, your family back in your world, everything. I'm going to make them suffer the most painful deaths imaginable."

"....."

Still, there was no response from Hajime. His expression didn't change either. It was almost as if he'd become an empty husk. But that wasn't what Ehitruje wanted. There was no joy in tormenting a husk, after all. He wanted Hajime to cry and beg for mercy. He wanted Hajime to get on his knees and entreat him to spare his loved ones...for nothing else would be able to quell the rage burning within him.

Determined to get a rise out of Hajime, Ehitruje decided to hit him where he knew it would hurt most. What he didn't realize, though, was that was the very thing that also served as Hajime's greatest source of support, and the very reason he would never break.

"But don't worry," Ehitruje said with a smile. "I promise to take very good care of this body. It's quite a splendid vessel, after all. I'll be sure to explore every single nook and cranny of it too."

Knowing that his beloved was going to be violated finally seemed to get a reaction from Hajime. Or at least, that was how it seemed to Ehitruje. That couldn't have been further from the truth, though. In reality, Hajime had been ignoring everything Ehitruje said, knowing it was pointless drivel. However, he did suddenly reach out to grab Ehitruje by the collar, and Ehitruje, thinking that Hajime had finally snapped, grinned sadistically.

"I've finally...found you..." Hajime muttered quietly.

"Huh?"

Ehitruje had no idea what Hajime was talking about, but he was confident Hajime must have finally given in to despair. And so, he leaned in closer, wishing to hear the defeated cries of a broken man. Instead, he heard just one word as Hajime invoked his greatest weapon.

"Transmute."

Ehitruje gave Hajime a confused look, but before he could ask Hajime what he was playing at "—Gaaaaaah!"

Countless blades sprouted from his chest. Pain wracked Ehitruje's body as the blood-soaked blades sliced through his innards. More blades sprouted from all over Ehitruje's body, joining together to

create a cage holding him in place.

This development was so unexpected that Ehitruje just stared in shock for a few seconds. He'd been taken completely and utterly by surprise. And unfortunately for him, those few seconds he left himself open gave Hajime all the time he needed to carry out his plan. This, in fact, was the real moment of truth Hajime had been waiting for all along.

“Transmute!”

Once again, Hajime activated his ultimate skill. All it did was allow him to shape and move metal, and as far as Ehitruje could tell, the only metal around was the blades sprouting from his body. Sure, they'd caught him by surprise, but they couldn't do any permanent damage when not even god-slaying concept magic had been able to truly hurt him. However, Hajime's right hand—which he'd forcibly moved using his ability to freely manipulate his own mana, since his muscles no longer worked—was pressed against his own stomach instead of the blades.

Crimson sparks ran down his fingers and a second later, another blood-drenched blade sprouted from Hajime's own stomach.

“What?!” Ehitruje exclaimed in shock. Not because Hajime had been hiding metal in his own stomach, or that he'd been willing to slice through it just to get a surprise attack off, of course. No, the reason Ehitruje was so surprised was because he felt the overwhelming, deadly power emanating from that blade. Chills ran down his spine, and his instincts told him to run. He could tell from a glance that the new blade Hajime had sprouted was enchanted with concept magic.

“Agh!”

Ehitruje tried to activate Heavenstep, but the countless blades slicing through the inside of his body were causing him too much pain to concentrate. Not even the auto-repair ability he'd inherited upon taking over Yue's body could fully heal damage that was being applied constantly. To make matters worse, the two blades that had shot out of his feet had dug deep into the ground, holding him physically in place so he couldn't just jump away. As a result, Hajime's blade reached him.

The translucent, pale-blue knife made of pure Divinity Stone stabbed into Ehitruje's chest, glowing crimson with the light of Hajime's mana.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Ehitruje screamed in agony. He no longer had the presence of mind to try to retain his dignity as a god. Frankly, it was hard to believe such a small knife had caused that much pain, but it had.

Using up a tremendous amount of his mana, Ehitruje destroyed

the blades holding him in place with a flash of platinum light and staggered backward, cradling his head.

A second later, ripples of energy started pulsing out of Ehitruje. They grew stronger with time, indicating that the true owner of this body had finally awoken.

“Impossible, I eliminated every last trace of that blasted vampire princess!”

Ehitruje had indeed watched as Yue’s soul vanished in a scream of despair, so he couldn’t understand why Yue was still alive...or why her soul was growing in power with each passing second, slowly but surely pushing his own soul out.

Grinning fearlessly, Hajime decided to throw Ehitruje a bone and clear up his confusion. In a flat tone, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, Hajime said, “Yue was smarter than you. That’s all there is to it.”

“Gah!”

Gasping in pain, Ehitruje finally realized he’d been tricked not just by Hajime, but also Yue. Even when she’d been reduced to nothing more than a soul, she’d put on a show of attempting to resist him while in reality focusing her efforts on finding a hiding place within the vastness of Ehitruje’s soul. She’d believed with absolute certainty that Hajime would come to rescue her, so even the dying screams Ehitruje had heard had all been part of Yue’s act.

“I see now...this knife is...”

Ehitruje pulled the knife out of his chest and looked down at it with bloodshot eyes. He destroyed it with a flash of platinum light, but Hajime seemed unconcerned. He was already moving on to the next step of his plan, his right hand once again emitting crimson sparks.

“That god-slating bullet’s only purpose was to shake your soul a little and give Yue’s soul the signal it needed to wake up. Now, this Oath Bloodedge on the other hand? Well, that was meant to actually sever your connection to Yue’s body and give her soul the strength it needs to take it back.”

The god-slating concept magic had been born out of a pure desire to destroy Ehitruje’s soul and nothing else. But when Miledi had given the dagger to Hajime, she’d warned him that it might not work at this point. And so, from the start, Hajime had decided to make use of its property to affect only Ehitruje’s soul and nothing else, while assuming that all of its other powers would be ineffective. Hitting Ehitruje with the god-slating bullet had let him make a clear distinction between what had been his soul and what was Yue’s.

The reason he’d been silent the whole time Ehitruje had been taunting him was because he’d been using his Demon Eye to pinpoint

the location of Yue's soul. His true trump card would only work if he could reach Yue's soul with it, after all.

The Oath Bloodedge that he'd hidden in his stomach in spherical form was the true attack aimed at Ehitruje. The god-slaying bullet had just been there to get Hajime to this point. The concept magic imbued into that knife was, in simple terms, "Don't touch my woman." It was an ability that kept anyone from interfering with Yue's soul that had been born from the monster of the abyss's rage and hatred at having his beloved Yue stolen away from him.

Now, no matter how hard Ehitruje tried, he wouldn't be able to maintain his hold on Yue's body for long. The concept magic he'd been hit with wouldn't allow it. His attempts to suppress Yue's soul were all stopped by the power of Hajime's concept magic, and as she awakened, her body started treating Ehitruje's soul as an invader and started to attack it, the same way white blood cells attack viruses.

"You mean this was your plan all along?!"

"I mean, if I could have just overwhelmed you with force, I would have. But Yue's life was on the line here, so I wasn't gonna leave anything to chance. It's only natural that I'd have two or three backup plans just in case, right?"

The platinum mana shooting out of Yue's body slowly started turning golden as she started regaining control. As the pulsing grew stronger and stronger, Ehitruje's expression twisted in pain and he started losing the ability to command Yue's limbs.

Yue's ironclad will was strong enough to push out even god's soul. This was her body, and in her mind, the only one allowed to touch it was Hajime.

Ehitruje looked into his own soul and watched as a golden glow began expanding from a dark corner, blotting everything out. The eternal vampire princess had awoken, and now the look in Yue's crimson eyes was one of love and trust, rather than hate and condescension. Ehitruje no longer looked out from Yue's eyes.

Hajime looked lovingly at Yue, Ehitruje momentarily forgotten. This was the moment he'd been waiting for since she'd first disappeared. Though the two of them had been ripped apart, they'd continued to have absolute trust in each other, and that trust was now being rewarded.

In that instant, Ehitruje realized that from the moment he'd left Hajime alive upon feeling Yue resisting his takeover of her body, he'd already lost to the strength of their bond. His defeat had long since been sealed.

Feeling an unpleasant sense of dread, he shook his head and screamed, "Don't underestimate me, Vampire Princess! This body is mine! I'll destroy every last shred of your soul for good this time! And

once that's done, you're next, Irregular! A concept this weak won't be able to stop—"

"True that," Hajime said lightly. Once again, he was two steps ahead of Ehitruje. He'd predicted that the Oath Bloodedge alone wouldn't be enough.

"What?" Ehitruje muttered, looking over at Hajime. He still didn't have the strength to stand, but he'd thrust his trembling right hand out, and upon seeing that, Ehitruje once again felt a primal fear.

As much as he didn't want to believe it, he could sense concept magic emanating from Hajime's closed fist. Hajime opened his palm, and sitting in it was a single bullet. It was covered in blood, and he'd clearly pulled it from out of his body just like the Oath Bloodedge.

"Wh-What good will a single bullet do?! You don't even have any artifacts to shoot it with!"

Ehitruje's battle with Yue's soul was so fierce he could no longer move, and he could feel panic creeping up on him despite his bravado.

It was true that Hajime couldn't move, and that Ehitruje was too far away for a blade to reach him now. A bullet alone couldn't accomplish anything. But of course, Hajime knew all that. And so, for the third time, he cast his ultimate spell.

"Transmute!"

Waves of crimson mana spread from his hand. A second later, glowing particles began to gather around Hajime's palm. They coalesced into a familiar shape.

"You're taking in metal particles from the air?" Ehitruje muttered in amazement. That was indeed what Hajime was doing.

"I figured I would need at least three concept magic artifacts to get Yue back for certain. I told you, I wasn't leaving anything to chance."

"You mean to tell me the entire time during our fight...from the very start, this is what you were aiming for?"

This was the real reason Hajime's Crosswelts and Grim Reapers had self-destructed upon being cut down. Of course, the explosions had also been an attempt to eke out a little more damage, but that had just been a cover for Hajime's true aim. His plan had been to spread metal particles all over this dimensional space. That way he could transmute no matter where he was. In fact, some of his crow-shaped Grim Reapers had only pretended to fight, while in reality, they'd been running around the battlefield to disseminate more metal particles.

Hajime had made this backup plan just in case he wasn't able to beat Ehitruje in a battle of numbers. He'd made Ehitruje think he was fighting as hard as he could to hit him with the god-slayer artifact, while in truth he'd simply been spreading ingredients for

transmutation all over the battlefield without letting Ehitruje notice. That was how he'd also gotten the metal blades to come out of Ehitruje. All of the Crosswelts that Ehitruje had cut down had spread tiny metal particles that he'd absorbed without realizing it. And as soon as Hajime had confirmed that Ehitruje wasn't aware of them, he'd immediately switched to his backup plan. Just in case, he'd also injected liquid metal into Ehitruje when he'd grabbed him with his prosthetic arm.

The last piece of the puzzle that had made this plan possible was Transmute's final derivative skill, Expanded Transmutation. Normally, a synergist needed to be touching whatever object they were working on to Transmute it, but it was this skill that let Hajime work with all of the metal particles scattered about. He'd learned that skill at the same time he'd learned Image Composition back at the Demon Lord's castle.

Its effect was quite simple. It let him transmute things without directly touching them, that was all. It was a fitting final derivative skill for a job as commonplace as synergist, but it was that exceedingly commonplace job that had gotten Hajime this far. It was his ability to transmute that truly made him into the monster of the abyss. So naturally, this very commonplace ability was more than strong enough to destroy a god.

Hajime's lips curled up into a feral grin as he declared, "You beat me in a battle of numbers, you overwhelmed me in close combat, and you were able to destroy all of my artifacts. But so what? Did you really think that you won just because of that?"

Ehitruje's jaw dropped open. That fierce battle where Hajime had nearly died a dozen times had been nothing more than a step of his enemy's plan.

Indeed, the fact that Ehitruje had so carelessly approached Hajime after destroying his artifacts had been because Hajime had lured him into thinking he was beaten. It was unbelievable to Ehitruje that Hajime's true plan had been to shred his beloved vampire princess's body from the inside out. Only an insane person would have come up with such a deranged plan.

Ehitruje was so taken aback by Hajime's insanity that he let his concentration slip for a second, letting Yue gain the upper hand in the battle for her body. As a result, he was unable to do a single thing to stop Hajime.

Using his Expanded Transmutation, Hajime created a very basic, single-shot revolver. However, that simple gun was more than enough. Hajime loaded his concept magic bullet, the final weapon he needed to deal a lethal blow to Ehitruje.

"Stop getting in my way!" Ehitruje roared, trying to push away

Yue's soul to no avail. He couldn't move, and every single time he tried to cast magic, Yue's soul disrupted the flow of mana in her body. She was clearly assisting her lover as best she could.

"Hajime."

Hajime heard her confident voice, clear as day, and he grinned fearlessly.

"I'll be taking Yue back now. Every last drop of her blood, every last strand of her hair, every single fragment of her soul belongs to me!"

Hajime pulled the trigger, and a crimson streak shot through Ehitruje. The bullet he'd fired was an Oath Bullet, enchanted with the exact same concept magic as his Oath Bloodedge. Naturally, the bullet was just as effective as the knife.

Ehitruje had just barely been managing to contain Yue's soul until now, but this one shot wrested control of her body away from him. He let out a wordless scream, and at the same time, Yue crowed in triumph.

A second later, there was a burst of golden light. It was far warmer and far more vivid than the platinum light of Ehitruje's mana. Nostalgia washed over Hajime as he basked in the golden glow of his beloved Yue's mana.

Something that looked vaguely like a shade was expelled from Yue's body and she closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. When she opened her crimson eyes again, the only thing reflected in them was her beloved Hajime. She smiled as bright as the sun, looking like a flower in full bloom.

At long last, the Yue Hajime knew and loved was free. She slowly walked over to him. Though she was covered in as much blood as he was, that only made her more alluring.

There were no words to describe the wealth of emotions the two of them felt as Yue spread her arms wide, her golden-blond hair splaying out behind her. It was hard to tell if she was inviting Hajime into her embrace, or if she wanted him to embrace her. Either way, Hajime smiled gently and reached out to her with his one arm.

Yue hugged him tight, burying her face in his chest. Hajime wrapped his one arm around her as well, bringing her even closer. The embrace made his wounds ache, but the pain of his physical injuries was nothing compared to the pain of being apart from Yue for so long.

Yue pulled her head back a little and cupped Hajime's face in both hands. She then pressed her forehead against his, her eyes looking directly into his. A warm breath escaped her lips, and Hajime rested his hand against her cheek.

In a voice gentle enough to touch the hearts of any who heard it, Hajime said, "I came for you, my vampire princess."

“Mmm... I knew you would, my demon lord.”

Both of them chuckled, then leaned in closer for a kiss. It was a brief brush of lips against lips, but was filled with as much emotion as any longing, passionate kiss might have been. Their lips tasted like blood, but neither of them seemed to mind. In fact, Yue licked up the blood on Hajime's lips with relish.



Suddenly, a blast of lethal platinum light interrupted Hajime and Yue's touching reunion.

Yue reflexively turned back and held out a hand, immediately casting Hallowed Ground. As the beam of light hit it, she let out a small groan.

"Mrgh..."

Her brow furrowed. Yue had expended a great deal of her strength when she'd chased Ehitruje's soul out of her body. That was why she'd only been able to cast Hallowed Ground in response to the attack, rather than a much more powerful spatial magic barrier.

While this beam of platinum light was much weaker than the destructive force Ehitruje had unleashed from his three-ring halo, it was still a miracle that Yue had been able to stop it with just a Hallowed Ground.

Though Yue was exhausted, Hajime was too injured to even move. She knew it was her turn to protect him this time. Determined, she continued casting more Hallowed Grounds to keep the two of them safe.

"Die! Die! Die! Die, you goddamned Irregular!" a voice dripping with hate screamed. Looking over, Yue saw a human-shaped silhouette made purely of light standing at the point of the beam's origin. It looked just like the light apostles Ehitruje had mass-produced from his halo. While the tone and pitch of the voice were very different from when he'd been inhabiting Yue's body, it was obvious whom it belonged to. No one else sounded that childish, after all.

That puny silhouette of light was undoubtedly Ehitruje.

"This is MY sanctuary! Even if I'm stuck as just a soul, I still have enough strength left to beat you! I'm going to kill that Irregular right in front of your eyes, Vampire Princess, and then I'll make your body mine for good!" Ehitruje's voice echoed throughout the pure-white dimension, sounding like it was coming from everywhere at once. Despite his boastful claims, it seemed he couldn't use his claymores or his teleporting attacks anymore. The god-killer bullet Hajime had hit him with had likely done more damage than Ehitruje had let on. Moreover, Ehitruje had also expended a great deal of his strength trying to suppress Yue's soul. The Oath Bloodedge and Oath Bullet had exhausted him greatly too.

That being said, the platinum disintegration beam was still quite powerful, and as Ehitruje raged on, it started growing stronger. Cracks started appearing in Yue's multilayered Hallowed Grounds.

"Despair, puny mortal! Even your final trump card wasn't enough to kill me! You have nothing left to stop me with!"

The platinum beam grew larger, causing the cracks to spread. Yue desperately poured mana into her barrier to try to repair it, but it was taking damage faster than she could fix it.

Of course, Ehitruje didn't even suspect that Hajime might still have a concept magic artifact left. After all, only a handful of people in all of history had ever managed to use concept magic, including Ehitruje and his old comrades.

"When did I ever say that was my final trump card?" Hajime declared with a feral grin.

"What?!"

Once again, Ehitruje had underestimated the sheer depth of Hajime's determination, as well as his desire to get Yue back.

"Yue."

"Mmm..."

That brief exchange was all they needed. Though Yue didn't know the exact details of Hajime's plan, she knew exactly what he wanted from her. They understood each other well enough that longer explanations were unnecessary.

Yue rose to her feet and stood protectively in front of Hajime, focusing all her attention on holding back Ehitruje's beam. She stuck both her hands out, pushing her Hallowed Ground as far back as possible, angling it so that the shock waves of the impact would spread upward rather than toward Hajime. At the same time, she created a very tiny hole in her barrier, allowing a stream of metal particles to flow through it. They gathered around Hajime's palm, which was emitting crimson sparks, and formed into a single bullet. Hajime then bit down on one of his teeth and spat out a small stone fragment covered in sealstone.

This was the final concept magic he'd prepared to take down Ehitruje. The concept magic that denied the existence of anything it touched, the very same concept magic he'd created when he'd felt true despair after Yue had been stolen from him at the Demon Lord's castle. When his chains had disappeared, so had the concept magic he'd imbued them with, but by using Expanded Transmutation, he'd managed to salvage a thimbleful's worth of existence-denying material, which he'd then hidden in his back tooth.

The Oath Bloodedge and Oath Bullet's main purpose had been to rescue Yue, not kill Ehitruje. Hajime had known from the start he'd need more than just that. And so, he transmuted the piece of stone he'd spat out of his mouth into the bullet he'd just made and looked over at Ehitruje.

"You asked how I managed to kill Alvaheit, right? Well, the truth is, he just had the misfortune of being close by when I got truly pissed. Do you really think a guy like me would come up with something as

banal as god-slaying concept magic?"

"Y-You bastard!"

Hajime wasn't trying to kill Ehitruje because he was an evil god who was trying to destroy the world, and that certainly wasn't why he'd killed Alvaheit. The gods had simply pissed Hajime Nagumo off...and that was the one and only reason they were about to be killed.

Hajime was treating Ehitruje like a common thug who'd tried to mug him. It was a huge blow to Ehitruje's pride. No one had ever humiliated him so thoroughly in his life. He let out a scream of pure rage, but at the same time, he could instinctively sense the extreme threat the concept magic in Hajime's hand posed, and a big part of him wanted to run away.

Caught between his senses of pride and his self-preservation, Ehitruje hesitated. And that hesitation proved fatal.

"This is checkmate, you third-rate poser."

Grinning fearlessly, Hajime loaded the bullet into his single-shot revolver and pulled the trigger. The existence-denying bullet shot toward Ehitruje, leaving a crimson trail behind it. It easily cut through the platinum disintegration beam without slowing down in the slightest.

Realizing he couldn't win, Ehitruje finally decided to try to flee.

"I order you in the name of Yue—don't move!"

"Impossible!"

Yue hadn't just been sitting around and twiddling her thumbs while waiting to be rescued after Ehitruje had taken over her body. She'd been keeping a very close eye on him, analyzing all of the spells he cast and figuring out how they worked. She was a genius mage who'd become the strongest vampire in existence by the time she was a teenager. Ehitruje's magic may have been complex, but she'd felt him using it with her own body, so she was now able to replicate it to some extent. Though of course, casting Ehitruje's Divine Edict cost so much mana she nearly blacked out. Still, she gritted her teeth and kept herself conscious through sheer force of will. As a result, Ehitruje was momentarily bound in place.

"I-I'm a god! You can't do this to me! Damn you, Irregulaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

Though his face was just a blurry oval of light, it was clear his expression was twisted in fear. He watched in slow motion as the bullet sped toward him, counting down the milliseconds to his demise.

For millennia, he had thought he would live forever, but now he could see his death inching closer to him at supersonic speed. No matter how much he told himself he was a god, and that this couldn't be happening, he couldn't avert his eyes from reality. The merciless,

unstoppable, unreasonable monster of the abyss had sentenced him to death, sealing his fate. The bullet that could destroy anything parted Ehitruje's beam of destruction and pierced his heart.

"Gaaaaaaaaah!"

The remnants of Ehitruje's disintegration beam dissipated and he touched the hole in his chest with a trembling hand. Within seconds, his light-forged body began to break apart.

"Aaaaaah! No...this can't be...happening..."

Unable to stop his own destruction, Ehitruje could only watch as his body crumbled away. When he was nothing but a head, he looked up at Hajime and Yue.

"This can't be..." he whispered again one last time, then vanished.

Yue dispelled her Hallowed Ground and fell to the ground in a sitting position. Hajime slowly lowered his gun as well. The only sounds in the pure-white room were Hajime's and Yue's heavy breathing.

Smiling, Yue looked over her shoulder back at Hajime. He smiled back at her, but then a second later, his expression was filled with panic.

"Yue!" he shouted.

As she turned back, a truly unearthly scream reverberated across the room.

"Raaah!"

An invisible shock wave slammed into Yue and Hajime. Taken completely by surprise, Yue was blown back into Hajime, who wrapped his arm around her and twisted his body to shield her from any follow-up blows.

Another roar echoed through the room, and the altar Hajime was half-buried in was shattered into a thousand pieces. It was a small mercy that he wasn't simply crushed against the altar wall, but the force of the shock wave still sent him and Yue flying now that there was nothing to catch them.

Hajime bounced against the floor multiple times before finally coming to a stop a good distance away from the altar's wreckage. Rubble was scattered all around him.

"Gah! Yue..." Hajime wheezed, coughing up blood.

"Ngh... Hajime!"

Thanks to Hajime, Yue hadn't taken any serious damage, but the shock wave had still knocked the wind out of her. The two of them clasped each other's hands and unsteadily rose to their feet, leaning heavily against each other. As they looked around to see what had attacked them, their expressions stiffened.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me..." Hajime muttered.

"Is the Sanctuary...falling apart?" Yue asked.

The perfect, pure-white dimension did indeed look like it was breaking. Cracks ran through the walls, floor, and ceiling, and sections of the room were warped into strange shapes and flickering unsteadily. From beyond these dimensional rifts, Hajime and Yue could see glimpses of the Sanctuary's other rooms. They were visible for only a few seconds before they were replaced by another, cycling through in random order. It was clear what was causing this breakdown.

"Raaah!"

A black miasma was pouring out of the cracks and warps in the room. It gathered at a single point and started whirling like a vortex. There were a few apostles and monsters that had been caught in the flow of miasma as well, and they were crushed in the vortex with a series of sickening crunches.

Another bloodcurdling scream emanated from the center of that miasma.

"I guess...this is what's left of him?" Hajime muttered.

"Mmm..." Yue said with a nod. In the midst of the screaming, the two of them could pick out a few words here and there.

"I don't...want to...die..." "Why...can't you understand...that..." "Eternity...is everything..." "I...I am a god...why...?" "I'm not the one who's mistaken...you..." "Kneel before me...or I will destroy..." "Behold...the masses of people...worshipping me...giving me..." "No...I don't want...to die..."

Those words were a manifestation of Ehitruje's attachment to eternal life, his hatred for those who had disagreed with his ideals, his childlike desire to rule over everything, and his overwhelming narcissism. Ugly as they were though, Hajime could understand Ehitruje's overwhelming desire to not die, and his wish to destroy everything after he'd been abandoned and left alone. Though he didn't want to admit it, he'd been in a similar state of mind when he'd first fallen into the abyss. In order to survive, he'd become someone who didn't give a damn about anyone else and was willing to dine on even the meat of monsters to live. Plus, that part of him had never truly gone away, as evidenced by the fact that he'd been able to create existence-denying concept magic when Yue had been taken away from him.

"If I hadn't met you and the others, Yue, I might have ended up just like—"

Before he could finish, Yue put a finger to his lips and shook her head. In a gentle voice she said, "No, that *thing* is nothing like you, Hajime. I'm sure there were people who cared about him and tried to steer him back to the right path before he ended up alone. When he was talking about his past, he even mentioned that some tried to

reach out to him. He was the one who chose not to take their hands...and this is the result. Who you are now is a result of the path you've walked so far. A path that was very different from Ehitruje's."

Yue's crimson eyes sparkled with affection, and she gently stroked Hajime's cheek. Even after closing his heart off to others, Hajime had still answered Yue's cry for help. And despite saying he didn't give a shit about the rest of the world, he'd done a great deal to help many of the people he'd met on his journey. Had he not, perhaps there wouldn't have been anyone around to stop him when he'd gone on a rampage at the Demon Lord's castle. But there had been, and that was the definitive difference between him and Ehitruje. Yue knew that, which was why she didn't want Hajime putting himself down.

"I guess if you're saying that, it must be true," Hajime replied with a small smile.

"Mmm..."

Considering how dire the situation was, this was hardly the time to be doubting himself or getting all sentimental. Hajime once again steeled himself for the battle that was not yet over, and Yue smiled at him.

A second later, the miasma shot out in all directions. There was still a small core of miasma whirling around the center of the room, but it had thinned enough that the creature controlling it was now visible.

"That thing really is a monster."

"Mhm. I almost pity it."

It looked like a giant lump of flesh. Various creatures' bones, muscles, and skin had been smashed together to form its body, and numerous limbs stuck out of the misshapen lump at odd angles. It also possessed several writhing tentacles that looked utterly grotesque. Simply staring at it was enough to sap one's sanity with how deranged it looked.

Hajime couldn't sense anything of Ehitruje's personality or will from the creature. The existence-denying bullet had indeed killed Ehitruje himself. The only reason he hadn't completely disappeared was because his attachment to eternal life and desire to trample over everything were so strong that a shade of him composed of only those feelings had remained.

The creature that had once been Ehitruje let out another scream.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

A storm of wind swirled around it and the black miasma once again coalesced, sending out a series of invisible shock waves.

Hajime and Yue both dropped low to the ground, but they couldn't avoid being blown backward. They groaned in pain as they bounced across the ground, but they didn't let go of each other's

hands. Once they came to a halt, they once again staggered to their feet, using each other for support.

“Yue, suck my blood,” Hajime said calmly.

“But...”

“It’ll be fine.”

Yue hesitated. Hajime had said he’d be fine, but there was no way he’d survive losing more blood. He was already on the brink of death, after all. The deep wounds in his stomach and thighs hadn’t even closed up yet. He’d stopped the bleeding by clenching his muscles, but he’d already lost enough blood that it was a miracle his heart was still beating. It was only thanks to his unnaturally sturdy body that he was still conscious and capable of clear thought. Thus, Yue could tell that sucking his blood might really kill him.

In the distance, the flesh beast let out another howl. More shock waves rippled out, widening the cracks in the room and destroying entire chunks of it. The tentacles started extending in all directions as well, as if searching for prey. At this rate, both Hajime and Yue would die unless they did something.

Still, Yue hesitated, and Hajime gave her his usual fearless smile, baring his teeth. There was a dangerous glint in his eyes, the same glint that always reassured his allies and struck fear in the hearts of his enemies. Yue’s heart skipped a beat.

“Do you really think I didn’t have a backup plan for this eventuality?”

“Hajime...”

“It’s true that *I’m* out of trump cards, but you’re not.”

Yue was at a loss for words.

Ahhh, the man I fell in love with really is...incorrigible.

Her fears assuaged, Yue nodded and buried her fangs in Hajime’s neck. As she sucked his blood, she could feel her mana recovering little by little—and then suddenly her heart rate jumped. Her Blood Oath skill made it so that she could more efficiently convert blood into energy from one specific target, but that alone didn’t explain the sudden surge of power she felt as she drank just a few drops of Hajime’s blood.

The final artifact Hajime Nagumo had prepared for this battle was—himself. Or to be more specific, his blood. He had enchanted the iron in his blood with a combination of evolution magic, spirit magic, and specialized CheatMates to be as effective as possible at restoring Yue’s strength. He’d turned his own body into a unique artifact just for Yue.

On the off chance that he lost all of his artifacts, Yue was too exhausted to fight, and his existence-denying bullet didn’t kill Ehitruje, Hajime had wanted to make sure there were still options

available for them.

“Mmm...” Hajime’s blood was so delicious that Yue let out a small moan of pleasure.

A second later, the flesh beast’s tentacles shot out toward the two of them. Their ends were tapered and sharp enough to pierce through flesh. Yue pulled away from Hajime’s neck and stuck her hand out toward the tentacles. The space in front of her warped, tearing open a hole to another dimension. The tentacles passed through the hole and were immediately destroyed.

Yue had opened a portal to another disintegrating section of the Sanctuary and let them be destroyed along with it. Normally, that would have taken a lot of mana, but as the Sanctuary was falling apart, the borders between dimensions were quite thin and she was able to do it efficiently.

Once she was sure the two of them were safe, she turned back to Hajime. His eyes were unfocused, and his face was pale. Even the few drops of blood that she’d sucked had taken quite a toll on him. It was clear he was struggling just to stay conscious. If not for the severe pain of his wounds, he might have actually blacked out.

Yue hurriedly started casting restoration magic on him, but after she saw the look in his eyes, she stopped. He didn’t want her to expend any unnecessary mana. Though she desperately wanted to ease his pain, she nodded and instead picked him up.

In a raspy, yet still determined voice, Hajime said, “Regular...attacks won’t be enough...”

“Mmm... We’ll need concept magic stronger than the one you just used on him.”

Hajime nodded in agreement while Yue created another portal to redirect the flesh beast’s next attack.

“But I don’t have enough mana to do it alone...” Yue added.

“Use metamorphosis magic...on me to—”

“You want me to turn you into a vampire? Are you saying you’ll heal yourself with my blood because I have a lot left?”

Yue was stunned. She hadn’t even considered that possibility. But after thinking about it, she realized it was theoretically doable. She ran some quick calculations in her head. Of course, Tio had already proven it was possible when she’d obtained magic that had let her turn other creatures into dragon familiars. Granted she’d needed the help of Hajime’s artifact for that, but Yue’s skill with magic was far greater.

Yue had no way of knowing that Tio had done something similar already, since that had happened after she was kidnapped, but she was once again amazed at just how thoroughly Hajime had prepared for this battle. She was also overjoyed because it meant Hajime

trusted her enough to make this insane plan work. If she didn't meet his expectations here, she didn't deserve to call herself his woman.

"What will we use to make the artifact, though?" she asked curiously.

"My eye."

It was at that moment that Yue realized Hajime's eye patch had been enchanted with magic that made it difficult to notice whatever was behind it unless Hajime specifically brought attention to it. Of course, if someone was calm, they'd be able to overcome that minor enchantment, but this was why Ehitruje, who'd been acting purely on rage and a desire to humiliate Hajime had overlooked his Demon Eye.

Yue peeled away Hajime's eye patch and dug her slender fingers into his eye socket. Hajime let out a small groan, and Yue pursed her lips and swiftly pulled the Demon Eye out. It was perfectly spherical and glowed a faint, pale blue.

"Yue...I'm counting on you."

"Mmm... Don't worry, I'll take care of the rest."

Hajime's body was enveloped in golden light as Yue started the transformation process. She used spatial magic to keep the flesh beast's attack at bay while casting a combination of metamorphosis, spirit, and evolution magic on Hajime. It was honestly awe-inspiring how many different types of ancient magic she was managing to juggle at once.

There was no need to turn Hajime into a full vampire, so all Yue had to do was grant him the ability to regenerate by sucking blood. Still, even that was a nigh-impossible feat.

The flesh beast that had once been Ehitruje instinctively seemed to realize that tentacle attacks were getting nowhere and started slowly lumbering toward Yue and Hajime. Yue had until it reached them to transform Hajime, or they'd all be dead.

She was so focused on the vampirification that her defenses weakened for a moment, and a few tentacles grazed her. But she paid them no mind and concentrated only on the task her beloved partner trusted her to accomplish.

"Yue."

"Mmm... I'm ready, Hajime."

Hajime's canines grew a few centimeters and his irises had turned crimson. He leaned closer to Yue and bit into the soft skin of her neck.

"Nnnnaah."

Yue had succeeded with flying colors. With every drop of blood Hajime drank, his wounds healed a little. And though Yue knew this was no time to be getting horny, she couldn't help but moan a little every time Hajime sucked on her neck. She wanted this moment to go on forever, but the rational part of her mind that was still focused on

their predicament came to a worrying conclusion.

It's not enough.

Indeed, even after giving Hajime her blood, the two of them combined still didn't have enough mana to create a concept stronger than the existence-denying bullet Hajime had used. And she knew she wouldn't be able to give Hajime much more of her blood without running too low herself. Moreover, she'd expended a great deal of her mana to transform him into a quasi-vampire. At this rate, they really would die here. As always though, Hajime had thought ahead.

"Don't worry. When I made myself into an artifact for you, I did a lot more than just make my blood better."

Simply hearing Hajime's confident voice was enough to reassure her. Hajime pressed his lips against Yue's, but this kiss wasn't just to show his affection. It was, in fact, the final backup plan that he had prepared.

Ignoring her small moan of pleasure, he bit into her lips with his fangs. A second later, she did the same, and the two of them started slurping each other's blood.

After that, an explosion of mana erupted from both of them. Golden and crimson mixed, creating a spectacular light show. Their mana spiraled upward, breaking straight through the roof of the Sanctuary and rising toward the heavens.

Both of them should have been completely spent, yet the amount of mana pouring out of them was greater than ever before. This was all thanks to the technique Hajime had devised to theoretically let both of them generate infinite mana, Ultimate Bond. The metal particles Hajime had injected into Yue's body during his fight with Ehitruje had actually been an artifact in and of themselves, but they'd been designed to only activate when mixed with Hajime's blood and when Yue was using her power to convert blood into energy. This artifact had the power to restore the power in one's blood that was temporarily lost when it was sucked by a vampire. Since both of them had this artifact in their blood now, they could theoretically generate infinite mana.

In other words, as long as they were kissing, they would keep increasing their mana.

"Aaahn..." Yue trembled, both from the pleasure of the kiss and the rush of power flowing through her. It was the same for Hajime. He held Yue close, savoring the taste of their bloody kiss.

The flesh beast was now only a few meters away from the two of them.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

It let out a scream, shooting out its tentacles and shock waves at the same time. Yue didn't even look at it as she dispelled her portals.

There was no need for defense anymore. In fact, the torrent of mana rolling off of Hajime and Yue was so dense that it was creating an unbreakable barrier by itself. It filled the room, and it was quite possible there had never been such a concentration of mana in one place in the entire history of the world.

Hajime and Yue finally broke apart, but they kept their gazes fixed on each other. This was hardly the time and place to be flirting, but they were surrounded by such a dense wall of mana no one could have stopped them anyway. The two of them placed their palms together, Hajime's Demon Eye, made from Divinity Stone, and the tiny revolver he'd made nestled between them.

Once again, Hajime activated the spell that had gotten him through every hardship he'd come up against thus far.

"Transmute!"

Crimson and golden mana melded together completely, creating a burst of sunrise orange. The surge of mana was powerful enough to force the flesh beast to take a few steps back and scream in pain.

A second later, the burgeoning bubble of light shrank down, coalescing inside the small gun Hajime and Yue were holding together. Hajime's hand was shaking with exhaustion, so Yue helped steady his aim. Their gazes were both focused on what had become of Ehitrufe.

Crimson and golden sparks ran down the length of the gun barrel. The bullet capable of finally putting an end to the monster that Ehitrufe had become started to form within the gun's chamber. The concept magic imbued into it was without a doubt the strongest concept either of them had ever created.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The flesh beast launched its tentacles at Hajime and Yue, instinctively sensing the threat that the bullet they were making posed. However, such a haphazard attack was, of course, incapable of even hitting the two of them.

"You're like a fairy-tale heroine, Yue, blessing the protagonist with victory with a kiss."

"Mmm... And you're the perfect protagonist, grasping victory from the jaws of defeat at the last minute."

As they bantered, the two of them slowly started to pull the trigger.

"All right, you half-dead shade. I've got only one thing left to say to you."

"Yeah."

The two of them sucked in a deep breath and shouted in unison, "You get what you fucking deserve, you bastard!"

They finished pulling the trigger and the bullet shot out with a

surprisingly quiet noise.

How dare you use my body to hurt Hajime?! Not even a thousand deaths can atone for such a sin!

Hajime's thoughts were, of course, in a similar vein to Yue's. The two of them loved each other so deeply that any time the other was hurt in any way, shape, or form, they immediately flew into a rage. Moreover, the concept packed into that bullet—that one should pay for the sins they've wrought—was akin to an encapsulation of the feelings of every single person across the history of Tortus that had been toyed with and trampled on by Ehitruje.

A single streak of light shot across the room and, small though it was, it contained the most powerful concept magic that had ever been. All the pain and suffering Ehitruje had inflicted on humanity over his long, long lifetime was coming back to smite him.

For a moment there was silence as the streak of light pierced through what Ehitruje's body had become. Black blood as thick as sludge spilled from the hole the bullet had made, then the flesh beast began to disintegrate.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The pained screams of a dying monster filled the room and a mixture of black miasma and platinum-colored mana started rising up into the sky. They traveled through the Sanctuary's ceiling and even the dark red sky above it.

For eons, Ehitruje had caused the people of this world untold amounts of suffering. And now, at long last, he was paying the price for his crimes. Not even the fires of hell were hot enough to give him the suffering he truly deserved, but it would be a start.

After a solid minute of screaming, the black miasma and platinum mana finally faded completely, leaving nothing behind. This time, Ehitruje—the self-styled god of this world—was dead for good.

The small revolver that had slain god crumbled away into dust. For a while after that, Hajime and Yue just leaned against each other in silence, enjoying the feeling of holding each other's hands. They looked at each other, smiling happily.

“I guess this isn't really the time to be resting, huh?” Hajime said.

“Mhm... Can you stand?”

“Tch, I can't even move my arms, let alone my legs. How about you, Yue?”

“It's hard enough just to stay upright.”

With the death of its creator, the Sanctuary had started falling apart. The rumbling was growing louder by the second, and there were countless cracks and holes in the pure-white space.

Unfortunately, neither of them had the strength left to move. Even Hajime hadn't predicted the real trial would come *after* Ehitruje was

dead.

“Sorry, Yue... I was thinking that after we killed Ehit and healed up, we’d be able to use the particles left in the air...or even my bones...to make a Gate Key, but...”

“Mmm... Doesn’t look like we have the time for that.”

They couldn’t even recover their mana using Ultimate Bond. The metal particles that served as the basis for the technique hadn’t been able to withstand the burden of constant use and had lost their power. Plus, both Hajime and Yue were exhausted down to their very souls, so even if they did have mana left, they wouldn’t be able to cast ancient magic. Trying would just knock them out.

Hajime had prepared as best as he could, but he wasn’t omnipotent. In their current situation, he couldn’t think of any way to buy them the time they needed to recover either.

Hajime frowned as he watched the room start to break apart even faster. Despite the hopeless situation though, he refused to despair.

“There’s no way...I’m going to let it...end here... We’re going back home even if we have to crawl there.”

“Mmm...”

Lending each other their shoulders, Hajime and Yue literally started crawling across the room. They were heading toward one of the holes that was showing a hazy image of the surface of Tortus. It was slow going, since they had to avoid all of the giant cracks that were more like crevasses and detour around the holes that led to dimensions they didn’t want to fall into, but step by step they pushed forward, just like they always had.

Eventually, they reached their destination. The warped, twisted space that stretched out below them looked too turbulent for any living creature to survive passing through. Hajime and Yue could both tell instinctively that if they jumped in there, they wouldn’t come out alive. Even though they could see the unified Tortus army spread out below them, they couldn’t reach it. Even though Kaori was down there waiting for them, they couldn’t get to her. It was right below their eyes, but the surface was still so very far away. Their only hope was to wait until the very last second and pray that Hajime recovered enough mana to make some artifacts that could protect them during their journey through that twisted space before the Sanctuary fell apart completely.

Unfortunately, reality was cruel. The room started disintegrating faster and faster and the black void crept ever closer to the two of them.

“Yue,” Hajime said.

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

“Mmm...I love you too.”

Hajime wouldn't recover in time. However, that helped both of them steel their resolve. As the cracks reached their feet, the two of them calmly smiled at each other and kissed. They then prepared to jump, willing to gamble everything on a reckless attempt to reach the surface through that portal.

“Waaaaaaaait! The super genius beautiful mage Miledi Reisen-tan is here right on tiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiime! Did you miss me? Didja?”

Right before they jumped in, something popped out of the portal.

“.....” Hajime and Yue stared at the newcomer in utter shock. It felt like they'd been in the middle of a funeral, but then a clown had suddenly popped out of the coffin.

Miledi continued as if she hadn't just popped in out of nowhere, in the same excited tone as always, “Come on, guys, where's your thanks? I came here to save you and you're just sitting there staring! You could have at least given me a round of applause! You're making me cry. I went through all this trouble and this is what I get?”

“God, she's so annoying,” Hajime muttered.

“Mmm... That's definitely Miledi.”

No one else could be that annoying. Hajime and Yue had no choice but to accept that the smiley-faced golem making a peace sign and winking at them was indeed real. At the same time, they realized Miledi had somehow stopped the destruction of the Sanctuary from reaching the small area they were in.

“Are...you doing this?” Hajime asked.

“He he, that's right. Something like this is a piece of cake for the great leader of the Liberators, Miledi-chan! Aren't I great? Oh, but save the praise for later. I can only keep this up for a few minutes.”

“Can you get us out of here?” Yue asked.

“But of course! I already sent the bunny girl and all the others back. You two are all that's left! See, I planned ahead! Now, where's that applause?”

Miledi's smiley-faced mask sparkled as she spoke, making her appear even more annoying. Still, Hajime and Yue were genuinely grateful for the assistance. Though admittedly, it galled them that they felt that way. Miledi's next words wiped the budding smiles off their faces, however.

“All right, here you go. A weaker replica Arrow of Boundaries. It's my last one. It probably wouldn't even work if the space here wasn't so unstable, but it should be enough to get you guys out. And here, have some bonus mana potions! They should get your mana back up to the point where you can activate the thing at least. Once you've recovered, activate that arrow and get the heck outta here! I'll take care of the rest!”

“What do you mean? You’re not coming with us?” Hajime asked as Yue grabbed the arrow Miledi tossed over to them. It definitely sounded like she intended to stay behind in this decomposing dimension. And indeed, her next words confirmed Hajime’s suspicions.

“Yep, I’m staying here. I can’t just let this messed up space run rampant. If it self-destructs naturally, it’ll cause damage to the land down below too. I need to stay back to stop that.”

“You make it sound like you’re dying here,” Hajime said, able to speak with a lot less pain now that he’d drunk the potion and recovered enough mana to activate the arrow.

In a matter-of-fact tone, Miledi replied, “That’s right, I’m going to die here. I’m going to use my last and strongest spell to compress this entire space into nothing. This is a dimension that can’t be allowed to exist, so I was planning on doing this from the start.”

In truth, Miledi’s last-ditch backup plan had been to use this spell to kill herself and Ehitruje along with the Sanctuary if Hajime failed to end him, but that would have been pretty difficult to actually pull off had Ehitruje been alive, so she was honestly quite grateful that Hajime and his friends had succeeded.

“Don’t be stupid. Sacrificing yourself in some heroic fashion isn’t your style—”

Annoyed by how easily Miledi had accepted her own death, Hajime tried to speak some sense into her. But before he could finish his statement, an ethereal image of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl of about fourteen or fifteen appeared above the golem. Miledi had projected her spirit out of her golem to show Hajime and Yue what she’d looked like back when she was human. She smiled gently at the two of them, and said in a satisfied voice, “This isn’t self-sacrifice, it’s selfishness. Long ago, I made a promise to my comrades. We swore that we’d kill god and save this world. It was an impossible dream back then, but now I finally have a chance to fulfill that promise.”

Miledi looked off into the distance, recalling the past. Her sky-blue eyes were filled with a mixture of regret and unyielding determination.

“In my time, I couldn’t save the world...or any of my friends. All I could do was entrust our hopes to the future. I’ve been waiting for this moment for thousands and thousands of years. Using up all my power right here, right now, to help the people of the world is the only reason I’ve lived this long.”

Hajime and Yue sat there, listening quietly. It was clear to them that this wasn’t just an attempt at a noble sacrifice to make herself feel better about her past failures. Miledi truly was trying to fulfill the promise she’d held dear to her heart for all these millennia.

Miledi closed her eyes and added, “Thank you, Hajime Nagumo-

kun, Yue-chan. Thank you for achieving our long-held desire. And thank you for using our magic for good.”

For once there was no playful note to her voice, and Hajime and Yue were both moved by her heartfelt gratitude. They no longer felt compelled to stop her, but they were glad they were there to witness her final moments.

Smiling, Yue replied, “No, thank you, Miledi. Your magic helped me out the most. In a way, you could say I’m your successor, Miledi Reisen.”

“He he he. Sure, I’ll allow it!”

“‘Live your life however you wish. I know your choices will definitely help this world.’ That’s what you told me when we first met. Now that it’s all over, do you still think my choices were the right ones?” Hajime asked.

“Of course! You sent that shitty god to hell, and I’m still here. You even gave me the chance to use what remains of my washed-up life to help people. Thanks to you, I can finally go meet my comrades with my head held high.”

Had Miledi still been in her mortal body, she likely would have been tearing up right now. Though as it was, her soul projection still looked overcome with emotion.

“All right, you two, I can’t hold off this dimension’s destruction for much longer. It’s time to return to the people who are waiting for you. Don’t worry, that’s what I’m going to be doing too.”

The room rumbled, and the cracks started spreading again. Feeling that, Hajime and Yue rose unsteadily to their feet. Yue activated the Arrow of Boundaries in her hand with the little mana she’d just recovered thanks to Miledi’s mana potion. As the arrow began to glow, the two of them looked into Miledi’s eyes.

In a solemn voice, Hajime said, “Miledi Reisen. You have my utmost respect. No matter how many millennia passed, you never once wavered. You have the strongest will of anyone I’ve ever met, without a doubt. Oscar Orcus. Naiz Gruen. Meiru Melusine. Laus Barn. Lyutillis Haltina. Vandre Schnee.”

Hajime named all of the labyrinth creators—the Liberators who’d fought at Miledi’s side until the very end—one by one. He then placed his hand over his heart and bowed deeply.

“I swear I will never forget you, or your precious comrades.”

Yue also bowed and said, “None of your struggles were in vain. I swear that future generations will know what you did for them.”

Stunned, Miledi was momentarily at a loss for words. It almost looked like she’d just received a treasure she’d always wanted, but hadn’t expected to ever find.

“Oh, umm...come on, guys, why’re you getting all sappy on me?! I

can't even think of what to say! Anyway, get out of here. I really can't hold this place together for much longer!"

Embarrassed, she looked away and waved at Hajime and Yue to get going. The cracks at their feet really were getting larger, and if they didn't leave soon, they'd be swallowed up into the void.

Hajime and Yue smiled at Miledi, who still wasn't looking at them, one last time, then turned their backs to her. After making sure the surface was still being reflected in the dimensional tear they were about to jump into, they nodded to each other.

"See you around, Protector of the World," Hajime said.

"Goodbye, Protector of the World," Yue said at the same time.

And with that, the two of them jumped into the unstable portal.

Once they were gone, Miledi stared at the spot they'd been standing in.

"Protector of the World, huh? Come on, guys, that's just not fair. Saying that at the very end is going to make me feel like I actually did protect the world."

Miledi smiled to herself, and a second later, her sky-blue mana flared out. Cracks appeared in her golem's smiley-faced mask and her metal body started fading away from the edges, as if it was disintegrating.

Sparks ran down the body of the golem that had been made with all the knowledge and abilities at the seven greatest Liberators' disposal, and a giant black sphere appeared above it. Just then, Miledi felt as though she sensed another person's presence, so she looked up.

"Oh..."

Standing in front of her were her six irreplaceable comrades. Millennia had passed, but her memories of them were as vivid as when they'd first met.

"Guys..."

The specters of her fellow Liberators said nothing, but they were all smiling proudly at her. Miledi knew it was just a hallucination, but that didn't matter.

"You all came to pick me up together? He he he, well, all right, then. I guess there's only one thing to say!"

The swelling black sphere started swallowing everything up. The white room, all of the dimensions it was linked to, the cracks and holes that opened up into empty voids, all of it. It was like a true black hole.

Miledi's golem was destroyed along with everything else, but her soul glowed brilliantly for one last moment, and she shouted with all her might the words that finally signaled the end of her long, solitary journey.

"I'm back, guys!"

A second later, the Sanctuary and everything in it vanished without a trace.



Victory is ours!”

Their chanting grew louder with time, everyone hoping that their determination and will would reach those still fighting up above and clear away the darkness enveloping Tortus.

Humans, beastmen, and the visitors from another world all chanted in unison, putting their faith in Hajime and the others. There was only one person who didn't join in on the chanting—Kaori. She was so drained of mana that she could barely keep herself airborne, but she stubbornly remained in the sky and kept her gaze focused upward at the Sanctuary. She wanted to be as close as possible to greet Hajime and the others when they returned, which was why she forced herself to stay airborne even though her wings were flickering in and out of existence.

After a few seconds, Kaori's face lit up in joy. They were still a few thousand meters up in the sky, so a normal person wouldn't have been able to make them out, but Kaori could.

A small hole appeared in the cracked, deteriorating Sanctuary and a group of familiar faces leaped out of it. They started free-falling and didn't seem to be doing anything to decelerate.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Nuwooooooooooooooooooh!”

Two of them let out rather pathetic screams as they fell.

“Shea! Tio!” Kaori shouted. It was indeed Shea—her bunny ears flapping wildly in the wind—and Tio—whose torn kimono was revealing far too much skin—falling from the sky.

A short distance above them, Shizuku, Suzu, Ryutarou, and Kouki were all on Skyboards. Seeing that Shea and Tio were free-falling, the four of them hurriedly dived down to try to grab them.

Seeing their worried expressions, Kaori realized Shea and Tio were actually too exhausted to break their fall. She flapped her silvery-black wings, forcing her exhausted body into action. She accelerated upward, matching her speed to their downward acceleration, and grabbed Shea's and Tio's arms in midair.

“Shea, Tio! Welcome back!”

“Kaori-san! We made it!” Shea exclaimed.

“Many thanks, Kaori. It's good to be back,” Tio said in a more calm tone. The three of them hugged each other tightly, glad to see everyone safe and sound.

Kaori didn't have the strength to stay airborne for a long while also holding Tio and Shea, so she glided down to an empty patch of ground a short distance away from the army.

Shea and Tio breathed sighs of relief once they were on solid ground and all three of them sat down, too tired to stay standing. A few seconds later, Shizuku and the others came down as well.

“Kaori!” Shizuku shouted, dropping her Skyboard and running over to Kaori.

“Shizuku-chan!”

There were tears of happiness in Kaori’s eyes as Shizuku came over and hugged her. Suzu and the others followed suit.

“Kaori!!!!!! We’re back!”

“Suzu-chan! Oh...welcome back!” Kaori paused for a second when she realized Eri wasn’t with them, but then she hugged Suzu back as well, deciding it was best not to touch on that subject right now.

“Yo, looks like you guys got out all right,” Ryutarou said with a cheery wave.

“I’m glad you guys did too, Ryutarou-kun.”

Kaori gave Ryutarou a relieved smile, then turned to Kouki, who was standing awkwardly a short distance away. She smiled at him too, and he felt a weight lift from his chest.

“I’m glad you returned safely, Kouki-kun.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m...really sorry about everything. I mean it. And...thank you.”

Kouki bowed his head, tears spilling from his eyes. He had been prepared for a stern lecture, considering that he’d attacked Kaori back at the Demon Lord’s castle, so he was pleasantly surprised when Kaori welcomed him back like everyone else. He was eternally grateful that Kaori, just like Shizuku, hadn’t given up on him. Of course, he understood now that wasn’t because they loved him either, at least not romantically.

Kaori nodded to him, then looked back up at the sky, searching for two certain someones.

“Kaori-san...Hajime-san and Yue-san weren’t with us,” Shea said hesitantly.

“But fear not. We parted ways midway because it was necessary. I do not doubt that Master will return with Yue before long,” Tio added.

Shea and Tio also looked up at the sky. They, too, had absolute faith that Hajime and Yue would return.

“Besides, Miledi-san went to go get them, so I’m sure they’ll be fine...” Shea said, looking a little forlorn. She was thinking back to when Miledi had given them all a weakened knockoff version of the Arrow of Boundaries.

At first, Shea and the others had insisted on going with her to find Hajime and Yue, but Miledi had explained that she only had a few arrows left and that they were quite frail. Once used, they’d break and would only be able to keep a human-sized portal open for a short period of time. If she ended up having to use too many to get to Hajime and Yue, there would only be a limited number of people she’d be able to send back with the last one.

Still, Shea had been reluctant to just leave, but Miledi had insisted that she would get Hajime and Yue out safe and sound, and in the end, Shea had chosen to believe her. After all, she'd correctly surmised that Miledi herself wasn't planning on returning. The last living Liberator had, from the start, been prepared to sacrifice everything, including her life, to save Hajime and Yue, and more importantly protect the world.

"I know she's really annoying, but she's really strong too, so they'll be fine!" Shea said with a nod.

"Shea... Yeah, you're right. Besides, if the two of them are together, there's nothing they can't do," Kaori said.

"Indeed. Failure is not a part of their vocabulary," Tio agreed.

Kaori broke away from Shizuku and Suzu, then looked back up at the sky again. Shea, Tio, and even Shizuku did the same. They glared up at the decaying Sanctuary, praying for Hajime and Yue's safe return.

Meanwhile, the army was still chanting so loudly that it was a wonder they didn't lose their voices. And after a few minutes that felt like an eternity, it happened.

"Ah!" Kaori gasped.

A pillar of gold and crimson light shot up out of the Sanctuary. There was so much mana in that pillar that even Shea's and the others' jaws dropped open. The will, the *concept* pouring off of that mana could be felt even from here, and the soldiers fell silent as they looked up at it. Everyone else did too. They were too enamored by that spiral of crimson-gold light to do anything but stare, after all.

"Hajime-san! Yue-san!" Shea shouted happily, the first to break the silence.

A second later, the mana was sucked back into the Sanctuary, presumably converging on the point where Hajime and Yue were. Then, a pitiful scream echoed throughout the entire world, and though it wasn't ear-splittingly loud or anything, everyone all across Tortus definitely heard it. And at the same time, a streak of platinum light with dark black miasma swirling inside it rose out of the Sanctuary.

In that moment, everyone was absolutely certain that the light was the lifeblood of a god, spilling out from him. The platinum light dispersed into nothing, and silence returned to the world.

A few seconds later, the destruction of the world stopped spreading and instead turned back inward toward the center of the Sanctuary. It was almost as if it was being sucked in by a powerful black hole.

Once all the cracks were gone from the world, the Sanctuary vanished. Its destruction wasn't accompanied by an explosion or a

shock wave, but instead just silence and a brief ripple of light made up of seven distinct colors.

The bright golden yellow of noon, sunset orange, moonlight silver, verdant green, earthy brown, the obsidian of a night sky, and finally, an all-encompassing tinge of sky blue. As that seven-colored light spread outward, it erased the crimson pall that had settled over the world, returning proper color to the sky.

It was a beautiful spectacle.

“Ah...God...” one of the soldiers muttered. This time, though, it wasn’t a voice of supplication, but rather one of everlasting gratitude.

As the light spread it became fainter, but it never quite disappeared. Instead, it turned into a faint aurora in the sky, watching over the people of Tortus as they quietly shed tears of joy.

“Hajime-kun...Yue...” Kaori muttered through gritted teeth. She was squeezing her fists so tight they were drawing blood.

“Hajime...” Shizuku whispered.

“Nagumo-kun...” Suzu said.

“Goddammit. What’s taking you so long, you idiot?!” Ryutarou shouted.

“Nagumo,” Kouki said simply.

All four of them were looking up at where the Sanctuary had vanished. It was completely gone now, and all that could be seen in its place was the sun, shining its light down on everyone. But despite all their waiting, the two people Kaori and the others wanted to see most didn’t show up.

Though the world had returned to normal, the battlefield remained silent.

Up on the fortress rooftop, Yuka said in a trembling voice, “What are you doing? Hurry up and come back...”

Kousuke and Cam were both so exhausted that they had to lean against each other to stay standing as they looked up to the sky and shouted.

“Stop fucking around and get back to us, Nagumo!”

“Boss, you can’t vanish yet, I haven’t even repaid my debt to you!”

In the command room, Liliana had her hands clasped together in front of her chest so tightly that her knuckles were white.

“I won’t allow things to end like this. Please come back, or I’ll have to go looking for you.”

On the opposite side of the fortress’s roof, Aiko was also praying fervently for Hajime’s return.

“Nagumo-kun, you promised you’d return. You’re not allowed to break your promises. As your teacher, I won’t allow it.”

She was desperately holding back tears.

As time continued to pass, the common soldiers—as well as Kouki,

Ryutarou, and Suzu—started to think that Hajime and Yue really might have died up there.

“It’ll be fine!” Shea shouted in a confident voice. She said it so loudly even the soldiers heard her, though they were a good distance away.

Kouki and the others looked up, and they saw Shea standing defiantly in front of them, her rabbit ears standing up straight. She was still looking up at the sky, her gaze unwavering.

“It doesn’t matter what anyone else says, or what happens! As long as Hajime-san and Yue-san are together, they’ll definitely be okay! When they’re together, they’re invincible!”

Shea had no doubt that in her mind that they’d make their way out of this predicament. Her absolute confidence bolstered the spirits of those who were beginning to doubt, and suddenly, everyone felt foolish for ever having worried in the first place.

“He he, true that. They’re probably flirting right about now and have forgotten all about us,” Kaori said with a grin.

“I could honestly see that happening,” Tio said with a nod.

“It is their heartfelt reunion, after all. I guess we should give them some time,” Shizuku said with a coy smile.

Suzu’s and the others’ expressions softened as well, and a second later, Shea’s words were proven true.

“Hah! See, look!” she said, pointing up at the sky.

A small crimson ripple spread out from a specific point, and a tiny hole opened up in the seven-colored aurora that now appeared to be an ever-present feature of the world.

“Whoa!”

“Mmm...”

Hajime and Yue tumbled out of the hole, wrapped in each other’s arms. Hajime had his one arm around Yue’s back, while she’d wrapped both of his around his neck. The wind whistled in their ears as the two of them quickly accelerated to terminal velocity. From their height, they would hit the ground in about forty seconds or so.

In the distance, they could see Tortus’s army. With their bearing, they’d fall a few kilometers away from them.

“Yue, can you fly?”

“Nope. I used all my mana activating the arrow.”

“Yeah, figured. All right, this is gonna be a bit bumpy, so hang on tight.”

“Mmm... Don’t worry, I’ll never let you go again.”

“.....”

They were falling thousands of meters through the air, but Yue had eyes only for Hajime. In fact, she was smiling and licking her lips,

seemingly unconcerned with the dire straits they were in.

Hajime coughed loudly, and ignoring his racing pulse, got to work. He only had one arm, so it was hard to balance in midair, but he managed to right himself. As he did so, his body glowed with crimson mana.

“I can use this...maybe ten times if I push it as hard as possible.”

With his mana reserves nearly depleted, he could only create that many footholds with Aerodynamic. Somehow, he needed to soften the blow of falling eight thousand meters with just those ten footholds.

“Well, I guess if I’m with you, it’s not so bad,” Hajime said, looking at Yue.

“Mmnnh.”

Yue kissed Hajime’s cheek, which was an impressive feat considering how much the air pressure was restricting their movements. She, of course, had absolute faith that Hajime would succeed, no matter how impossible the odds seemed.

Naturally, Hajime had every intention of proving her right. He concentrated, and a crimson ring rippled out as he created his first foothold. It, of course, shattered immediately, but it slowed their descent somewhat. He repeated the process, calculating their speed and the distance to the ground as he did so.

At some point, the army noticed the ripples of crimson mana that were getting steadily lower in elevation. There was a lot of pointing and shouting, and then a second later, the commander of the allied forces of Tortus shouted, “Victory is ours!”

At long last, Hajime was able to hear the declaration he’d been hoping for. Shortly thereafter, the soldiers let out cheers of joy. It wasn’t just them either; people all across the world cheered at the prospect of living in a world that would no longer be toyed with by god.

Almost as if in response, the seven-colored aurora that covered the sky started emitting particles of light. They glittered in the bright sunlight, looking like diamonds sparkling in the sky. The Liberators, too, were celebrating the birth of a new world.

Bathed in the light shower, Hajime used his last Aerodynamic to perfectly decelerate just enough before hitting the ground so that the impact didn’t hurt too much.

Unfortunately, the holes in Hajime’s legs hadn’t fully healed yet, and Aerodynamic had completely drained him of mana, so he wasn’t able to absorb even the mild shock with his legs. The two of them fell, hitting the ground with a pathetic thud.

“Ha ha, that was a pretty uncool landing,” Hajime said, unable to move even an inch. His expression was relieved, though.

Yue was on top of him, content to simply rest in his arms. She

shook her head and said, "That's not true. That was the coolest landing ever."

"Really?"

"Mmm... Hajime, thank you. I love you."

She smiled, then kissed Hajime on the lips. Hajime couldn't move, so he just let her have her way with him. Granted, even if he could have moved, he couldn't ever say no to Yue. He simply had no desire to resist her, after all.

The two of them enjoyed a long passionate kiss, and the army's cheers faded away into the distance. But soon enough, voices they couldn't ignore reached them.

"See, I told you! They forgot all about us and are flirting! Wait, Yue-san?!"

"Sh-She's turned into an aduuuuuult?! Oh god, she's seducing Hajime-kun with her wily adult charms!"

"How can this be?! Master doesn't seem to be resisting either... It's as if she's drained his soul!"

"Sh-She looks really sexy...but I won't give up! A real woman forges her own path!"

Shea, Kaori, Tio, and Shizuku had arrived. Suzu, Ryutarou, and Kouki were a short distance behind them.

Shea and the others rushed over to Yue, their touching reunion marked with the same lively bickering as usual. Yue stopped kissing Hajime and got up, while Hajime simply turned his head, and the two of them beamed at their companions.

"Yo. We're back, guys."

"Mmm... I'm finally home."

"Welcome back!" Shea and the others said in unison, their happy voices echoing over the grassy plain.

The sky above was covered in glittering diamond dust and the dazzling sunlight was as bright as everyone's smiles. In the distance, Hajime could hear other people running over and calling his name as well.

Surrounded by warmth and feeling as though he'd accomplished something truly worthwhile, Hajime smiled back at everyone. It was a mixture of his usual fearless grin and the kind, gentle smile he'd had before being dropped into the abyss, and it immediately melted the hearts of all the girls who were in love with him.

Eventually, the exhaustion of the long, long battle overtook him, so he closed his eyes, falling into a deep sleep.

Final Chapter: The End of a Journey

Ragnarok. That was the name people had given to the battle against Ehit, the battle which had decided the fate of the world.

A month had passed since then, and lively voices could be heard in the place that had once been Heiligh's capital. It was mostly the voices of craftsmen and laborers that were barking out orders, calling for materials, and occasionally taking short breaks and chatting with each other.

The varied colors of dozens of different people's mana lit up the construction site as stone and lumber flew everywhere. It was the sight of a city being rebuilt with the magical powers that were commonplace in a fantasy world. Heiligh's capital had been mostly destroyed when Hajime had blown up the Divine Mountain. And yet, after just one month, the rubble had been completely cleaned away and reconstruction had begun.

Many of the people who hadn't been able to participate in Ragnarok, namely civilians and craftsmen, had come to help aid the reconstruction effort. These people belonged to all races and came from many different countries.

In truth, when Hajime's classmates had gone to the various nations to plead for aid, they'd installed the same monitor artifact that Liliana had used to survey the battlefield in the capitals of all of those countries, as well as their major cities. That way, all mortal races had been able to watch the battle for Tortus's survival at their local city plazas. The vast majority of people had indeed watched the battle unfold in real time.

And after witnessing such a legendary clash, they'd felt a strong desire to do something meaningful as well.

After the battle, Hajime had reopened the portals that connected most of the continent's major cities, and tons of people had come over to reunite with loved ones who'd been fighting and to celebrate humanity's victory. At the same time, they'd felt a pang of sorrow upon seeing the sorry state the capital was in, and had decided to dedicate their time to help rebuild it. Thanks to the massive influx of man power, the capital would be mostly rebuilt in just half a year.

The plains that had served as the army's base camp during Ragnarok had now become the site of the reconstruction effort's headquarters. The area around the fortress had been ravaged by the

battle, but now they'd been flattened once more and were filled with rows upon rows of temporary housing and other facilities for all the workers and craftsmen.

Many merchants had also come to Heiligh to sell necessities and trinkets and whatever else the laborers might need. Restaurants and general goods stores were popping up all over the place, and at the rate things were going, this temporary camp could very well end up a permanent part of the capital city. That would require some expansion, of course, but with some effort, the rebuilt capital would be far more splendid than the original.

The fort itself had also been repurposed to become a temporary Heiligh Palace. More windows and rooms had been added to make it a more comfortable living space.

In the command room of the fort-turned-palace, a young girl let out a worried sigh.

It was none other than Liliana S. B. Heiligh, the girl who'd led Tortus's armies and had become a legendary figure in her own right.

"Lily, if you keep worrying too much, you'll go bald," Yuka said to her in an exasperated voice.

"How can you say that?!"

She looked up from the document she'd been poring over at Yuka, who was sitting at her own desk, sorting a sheaf of documents. She'd elected to help Liliana with her duties, as had Aiko, who was sitting at the desk across from her.

"What's the big deal?" Aiko asked curiously. "If there are people who want to come, we should let them, right?"

"We're already over capacity!"

It was great that so many people wanted to come help restore the capital, but there was such a thing as too many. Because so many people were coming, Liliana was stuck in hell organizing all of them, finding places for them to live, expanding the temporary residential districts to house them all, and so on. At this rate, this temporary camp would turn into a proper city well before the capital itself was rebuilt.

Naturally, all of the nobles and ministers who had been assisting Liliana until now were also working hard on this matter, but ultimately, a lot of the responsibility fell on her young shoulders. She'd become a living legend, so everyone wanted to go to her for advice.

Normally, when such a large group of diverse people gathered like this, there would have been a lot more discord. The only reason things had been proceeding as smoothly as they had was thanks to Liliana. Because everyone trusted her, she was able to take command of the entire reconstruction operation. No one wanted to go against her

wishes, so people rarely argued with her decisions. Indeed, part of the reason Aiko and Yuka had decided to help Liliana was because they wanted to make use of their fame as the Fertility Goddess and the leader of her students respectively to bolster Liliana's clout. Though, of course, they genuinely wished to help her too.

"Now, now, calm down, Lily-san. Nomura-kun and the others are working hard at expanding our housing facilities, so there should be enough room."

"Aiko-san, that's a problem in its own right. At this pace, we'll end up building a capital city five times the original one's size. You do realize that once you're gone, we'll still have to govern that massive supercity, right?"

"O-Oh, yeah, when are Simon-san and his priests coming back?"

"Ai-chan-sensei, if you want to change the topic, you'll have to be more subtle about it..." Yuka said with a wan smile.

There were dark circles under Liliana's eyes, but she glared at Aiko with more force than one would suspect from such a young girl. Her experiences during Ragnarok had tempered her into quite the strong ruler. Aiko trembled, then looked away bashfully. She'd been talked down to by a girl ten years her junior, but she could tell from the look in Liliana's eyes that arguing would be a bad idea. Besides, people found it cute when she cowered like a small animal, and even Liliana couldn't stay mad. She shrugged her shoulders and leaned back into her chair, causing it to creak a little.

"He won't be returning for a while. He said it was his duty to spread the truth about god and what the Liberators accomplished. Though, I agree that it's not something the pope should be attending to personally..."

"He's surprisingly spry for his age. He can manage it."

"I think he just wants to travel."

Simon had, of course, survived Ragnarok, but he wasn't doing much to help Liliana. He was a free-spirited old man who wandered the city streets for fun, much to the chagrin of his bishops and priests. On the other hand, the common people loved him for how approachable he was.

"But you know, if the church needs to change, I think he's the perfect symbol for what it should become," Aiko replied, prompting the others to nod.

There was no need for a church that claimed its tenets and faith were absolute anymore.

Religion exists to serve the people, not the other way around.

The church should be a place people can go to for refuge and solace, not a stern overseer, for the people have the right to live

freely.

The best god is one who does nothing. One that simply watches over the lives of mortals and blesses them from up high.

If people need salvation, they should turn to each other.

If people need support, they should turn to each other.

Those who do good are holy men, regardless of what robes they wear.

These are the precepts of our new church.

The new tenets that Pope Simon had stated were a stark departure from how the church had been up until now. He'd waited until things had calmed down a little to unveil them, since he'd known they would cause a lot of confusion among believers. And as expected, they had, but since he'd been going around talking to commoners despite being seen as a living incarnation of god among the faithful, they'd slowly started coming around to his new doctrine. It was hard for the people to think there was anything so sacred and inviolate that it deserved absolute obedience when their pope was buying kabob skewers from city stalls and eating them in the streets, especially considering how he fled like a bat out of hell any time his bishops came to drag him back to his actual duties. Granted, some people had been so shocked they'd gone to hospitals claiming they were seeing hallucinations, but overall, Simon's efforts had been a net positive.

"You're right that there are some things that can only be accomplished with a pope like him, Aiko-san. Fixing the twisted values of the old church and spreading the truth about the Liberators are both important."

"The truth, huh?" Yuka said with an odd expression.

Hajime had made an addendum to the fake story he'd come up with Liliana regarding the good and evil gods. Now that the church's policies had changed, he'd been able to include a bit about the Liberators.

"I mean, it's mostly true? 'There's a real god out there called Ehichlibre, but then an evil god called Ehitruje covered up the truth of his existence and pretended to be the creator of Tortus. The Liberators were a group of brave heroes who gathered together to take him down and free the world from his tyranny.'"

"'But they weren't able to beat him and were branded Mavericks after he destroyed their organization. Even then, though, they didn't give up and created the Labyrinths to pass down their powers to people they deemed worthy. Their leader was the one who saved us from annihilation during Ragnarok, Miledi Reisen.' That's the story, right?" Aiko said, finishing the tale for Liliana, and frowning just like Yuka.

Only Liliana didn't seem to mind that they were fudging the truth a little.

"We have no need for a truth that will only bring the people suffering. Sure, part of that story is a lie, but if that small lie will help people keep their faith without despairing and stop needless conflict, then what's the problem?"

Yuka and Aiko exchanged glances, impressed by Liliana's reasoning. They then smiled a little at each other, glad to see her grow. Liliana ignored their patronizing looks and took a sip of her now-cold black tea.

"Besides, the important part of that story is all true. Miledi-san really did save us all."

Hajime had told her about Miledi's sacrifice, as well as what had happened during the Sanctuary's final moments.

"It was none other than Miledi Reisen who gave her life to stop the destruction of the Sanctuary from destroying the world. She undoubtedly prevented Ehit's final spiteful act."

Despite giving up her human body and moving her soul to a golem, despite spending millennia alone, Miledi had never once given up on mankind's future. Her devotion to the people of this world had been greater than anyone's. And during Ragnarok, hundreds upon thousands of soldiers had seen that with their own eyes. They hadn't needed Aiko's or Simon's speeches to know that Miledi had been thinking only of them, or that the seven-colored aurora that now covered the sky was what had protected their world from destruction. It was obvious to anyone who had eyes.

The title Hajime had originally given Miledi, Protector of the World, had already spread among the people, and they no longer considered her or her companions Mavericks. Historians were busy compiling the events of Ragnarok into their books, as well as going over older history books and making sure they were revised to tell the "true" tale of the Liberators. The story of Miledi and her comrades' struggle would finally see the light of day.

Incidentally, Ehichlibre was a made-up word Hajime had come up with that meant "the seven liberators."

In the original story Hajime had come up with, Ehitruje was an evil god who'd taken up the name of the real Ehitruje, who was supposedly good. But after learning that Ehitruje had amplified his powers by having people praise his name and pray to him, Hajime had decided to scrub the name Ehitruje from people's consciousness as much as possible just in case. Chances were that there was no way Ehitruje was coming back, but Hajime didn't want to take any chances. Plus, it also would have pissed him off if future generations thought he'd fought to rescue anyone named Ehitruje.

Ultimately, the story Hajime had settled on wasn't quite the truth, but aside from a few minor details, it was close enough. It was his way of thanking Miledi.

"Most of the newly appointed bishops and priests, as well as the members of the choir who survived, have all taken up their new posts all across Tortus. It helps that most of the old top brass of the church were massacred by Aiko when they tried to stop Hajime-san, so we were able to fill a lot of important posts."

"Gulp..." Aiko paled when Liliana mentioned that.

"Sorry. But don't worry, you and Tio-san simply brought them the glory of martyrdom, so I doubt too many people will be mad at you over that."

"Besides, the members of the choir were mostly clergymen like Simon, who were pseudo-exiled from the church, right?" Yuka asked.

"That's right. Which is why I'm sure this new 'truth' we've unveiled will be accepted without complaint by most people and become recorded history."

Liliana smiled wickedly, thinking about how to effectively mix truth and lies to get the results she was hoping for. Yuka looked sadly at her and muttered, "Lily...you've changed."

"What do you mean?!"

"You've become a lot more like Nagumo."

"Oh my...I can't believe you're saying he's branded me with his mark! Oh, how embarrassing!"

"That wasn't what I said, and it wasn't a compliment."

Yuka glared at Liliana the same way she'd glared at Aiko a few minutes ago. However, Liliana was too busy blushing and fantasizing to hear.

Instead, Aiko jumped out of her chair and shouted, "Y-You shouldn't say such things like...branded! You're still so young, Liliana-san, so such things are too early for you! Besides, as a princess, you should act with decorum!"

"Don't think you can take the moral high ground! I know what sort of things you've been doing with Hajime-san!"

"I-I-I-I have not!"

"Liar! You can't escape my perceptive eyes! I can't believe a teacher like you is spouting lies! And you have the gall to tell me I'm not telling people the truth?!"

"Th-Th-They're not the same thing!"

"Yes they are!"

Liliana and Aiko argued back and forth, but there was no viciousness in their voices. The two of them were speech buddies, after all. In fact, they'd gotten a lot closer recently and showed sides of themselves to each other that they wouldn't to most people, just

like right now.

“Hmmmmmm. I see. So even you’ve become his woman, Ai-chan-sensei,” Yuka said with a piercing look.

“S-Sonobe-san?!”

Aiko turned back to Yuka, but she just harrumphed and turned away. It was obvious from the way that she was twirling her hair and tapping her foot that she was jealous.

“U-Umm, it’s not what you—”

“No need to explain. It’s got nothing to do with me, anyway. Besides, I already know that Yue-san’s the one who manages Nagumo’s harem. Anyone she’s okay with gets to join, right? That’s how it is for Tio-san and Kaori, right? Actually, I know she was *pushing* for Nagumo to start fucking those two. I guess now you’ve been accepted by her too, huh? Congrats.”

“I have...” Aiko said in a tiny voice, looking extremely repentant.

In fact, there had been quite a few girls who had officially joined Hajime’s harem over the past month. Glad to finally be reunited with him, Yue had been all over Hajime for the first few days. For his part, Hajime had been away from Yue for what felt like a whole month thanks to the Hour crystal, so he hadn’t minded her affections in the slightest. This, of course, included nightly sex.

Naturally, this got Shea, who had technically been officially accepted as part of Hajime’s harem, as well as Kaori and Tio, jealous, so they started challenging Yue to daily duels and begging her to let them spend time with Hajime too.

They’d been getting more and more emotional with their pleas, and that had gotten Yue thinking. When they returned to Japan, she, of course, planned on staying at Hajime’s house as his lover and future wife. And she was planning on asking Hajime’s parents to let Shea live with them too. But what about Tio? Kaori had a home to return to, so there was no worry there, but Tio didn’t. She couldn’t just leave Tio behind in Tortus, but if they were living together and she was the only one not officially part of Hajime’s harem, it would just be too sad. Even a raging masochist like her wouldn’t enjoy that kind of treatment. It would break her, Yue was sure of it.

And so, after some discussion with Hajime, Yue had decided to cement her position as the first wife and the most special of Hajime’s lovers, but allow Tio into the harem as well. There wasn’t really much resistance either from her or from Hajime, since they both cared for Tio as much as they did Shea at this point. Besides, it was a nice thing that their family was growing. And as much as it pained her to admit it, Yue knew that she felt just as much affection for Kaori as well, so she begrudgingly allowed her in too. At which point, Yue had realized she’d let so many people in that she may as well let the rest of the

girls in love with Hajime join too, so Aiko and Liliana had been given the stamp of approval too.

Granted, Aiko and Liliana had only gotten Yue's approval and had still needed to win Hajime's, so unsurprisingly, they'd started coming on to him stronger than ever. That being said, Liliana was royalty, and too young for the kinds of activities all the other girls were engaging in, so her relationship with Hajime was more wholesome. For now, anyway.

While Aiko was thinking back on all that had happened over the past month, a group of four girls came in through the open door.

"Jealousy doesn't suit you, Yukacchi," Nana said with a smile.

"Yeah, don't take your anger out on Ai-chan-sensei. It's your own fault that you were too much of a coward to make your move when everyone else did," Taeko added.

"You reap what you sow, after all," Mao said.

"C-Come on, don't bully her so much, you three!" Ayako said in a worried voice.

The four of them had also been helping out with the capital's restoration, and judging by the trays of food they were holding, they'd come to eat lunch with everyone in Liliana's office.

"How many times do I have to tell you, I don't have a crush on Nagumo!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say," Nana, Taeko, and Mao said in unison. Only Ayako showed Yuka any sympathy, but that was because she was in the same boat. Like Yuka, she was unable to be honest with her feelings, but in her case, it was because she was shy rather than tsundere.

"Well, anyway, you can rest easy Ai-chan-sensei," Nana said with a grin as she started distributing food to everyone.

"What do you mean?"

"Even when we get back to Japan, all of the students have promised to keep the fact that you're dating one of your students a secret."

"You can trust us!" Taeko added.

"You had a pretty steamy night with Nagumo-kun last night too, didn't you?" Mao asked, eyes brimming with curiosity.

Aiko looked as though she'd been hit over the head with a hammer. After a few seconds of stunned shock, she blushed bright red and ran out of the room, unable to bear the teasing any longer.

"Ah!"

"Hwuh?"

But as she ran out, she ran into Atsushi, Noboru, Akito, Jugo, Kentarou, and Kouki, who'd also all been helping out with the capital's restoration. Her eye's met Atsushi's, and there was a long,

awkward pause.

“D-Don’t worry, we’ll keep your relationship a secret too,” Atsushi said after a moment.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Covering her face with her hands, Aiko slunk back into the room, utterly defeated. She sat down in the corner and cradled her knees, rocking back and forth, tormented by a mixture of shame and self-disgust.

“Did I say something wrong?” Atsushi asked.

“I mean, what else was there to say?” Akito replied as he rested a comforting hand on Atsushi’s shoulder.

“Man, I still can’t believe it. I mean, I suspected it when she asked Nagumo to call her by her first name back at the Demon Lord’s castle, but like, man, that guy really gets around,” Noboru said with begrudging admiration.

“Hey, stop teasing Ai-chan, you guys!” Nana said.

“I don’t want to hear that from you, Miyazaki!” Atsushi retorted.

The guys also walked into the room with their packed lunches and joined the others. The rest of their classmates would be coming pretty soon too. Ever since Ragnarok, they’d been eating most of their meals together. Fortunately, the office was large enough to accommodate all of them. However, there was one particular student who hesitated to join the group.

“What’s wrong, Amanogawa?” Jugo asked, turning to Kouki, who was still standing in the doorway.

“Oh, umm...I think I’ll eat somewhere else after all...” Kouki replied with an awkward smile. But as soon as he took a step backward Kentarou, who was at the back of the group, kicked him lightly in the back.

“Don’t be stupid. We’re not gonna ostracize you just because you made a few mistakes in the past. Hurry up and get in there.”

“Whoa!”

Kouki stumbled forward, entering the room. The girls turned to him, and he sucked in a pained breath.

“Stop standing there like a deer in headlights and pick a seat already,” Yuka said, pulling an extra set of chairs out of her Treasure Trove. Realizing it was too late to leave gracefully now, Kouki hesitantly picked a chair. He no longer exuded charisma with his every move like he had when he’d first been summoned here. It seemed he’d lost it along with his self-confidence.

Even though he was the hero, he’d defected to the enemy’s side right before humanity’s pitched battle for their survival. All of the other nations knew he was the chosen hero too, so he couldn’t pretend to have just been one of the unimportant students.

Hajime had offered to cover up his misdeeds by spreading another fake story about what had happened to him, but Shizuku, and more importantly Kouki himself, had sternly refused the offer. Over the past month, Kouki had come to terms with the truth he'd tried so hard to deny, and gone around apologizing to everyone he'd wronged and doing everything he could to help the restoration effort.

Unsurprisingly, it hadn't been easy to get the people of Tortus to forgive him. The leaders of the various nations, as well as the common people, still regarded him with wariness and suspicion. Kouki had spent the last month purposely exposing himself to their unfriendly glares.

Indeed, even some of his classmates were still angry at him. But Kouki's sincere apologies, the regret he constantly showed for his past actions, and the herculean effort he was putting in to change hadn't gone completely unnoticed. Moreover, he'd taken it upon himself to put some distance between him and Shizuku, Ryutarou, and Suzu, even though they'd forgiven him. They were the ones he'd hurt the most, and he still felt extremely guilty about that. That fact hadn't gone unnoticed by his classmates, and when they all filed in to join for lunch, no one glared at him at least.

"You know, Amanogawa," Yuka suddenly said, turning to Kouki. He'd been eating in a corner of the room away from the rest of the group, and he jumped a little with surprise when he was addressed. He then looked down at his hands, a sinner waiting to hear his sentence.

"I've told you this before too. It's not like I've swept everything you've done under the rug. I'm still not sure if you've really reformed or not either. Everyone else is probably thinking something similar."

"I know..."

"But at the same time, I'm genuinely glad you came back to us alive."

Kouki hesitantly looked up. All other conversations had halted, and his classmates were all looking at him.

"It's still hard to fully trust you. But you know, Shizuku risked her life to bring you back, and we all trust her, so we're not going to just cut you off. When all's said and done, you're still one of us."

"Besides, it's partly on us for relying on you during all of the hard fights and then not even trying to stop you when you started leaning toward the dark side," Jugo added solemnly.

"Sonobe's right," Kentarou said with a shrug of his shoulders. "If nothing else, we're all glad you came back alive. We're tired of seeing our classmates die. Truly."

Everyone else must have felt the same way, since no one said anything to argue. No longer looking like a cowering animal, Aiko

rose to her feet and spoke to Kouki in a reassuring tone.

“Amanogawa-kun. I’ve been watching you this past month, and I know for a fact that your remorse is heartfelt. I’m sure everyone else does too. Of course, it will take time for you to regain the trust you lost,” Aiko stated as she walked over to Kouki and looked him directly in the eyes. “I won’t tell you to stop worrying and think only of the future. It’s important not to forget the mistakes of the past, after all. But that being said, there’s no need for you to isolate yourself from others.”

“I-I...”

Kouki once again looked over at his classmates. They weren’t looking kindly at him, nor were they looking at him with trust like they once had, but their gazes weren’t cold either. They were looking at him like an equal, willing to see Kouki Amanogawa for who he was.

He had been so focused on atoning that he hadn’t even noticed that the suspicion and anger had vanished from their gazes. Though their eyes weren’t kind, they brought the kind of solace kindness alone never could.

“I’m sorry... I really...hic...am so sorry... Thank you, guys...” Kouki let the tears spill freely from his eyes.

“Don’t cry, idiot. You’re ruining your good looks,” Atsushi said in a joking voice.

“Today might finally be that special day. So perk up, Amanogawa,” Noboru added.

“Yeah, you’ll ruin the mood if you’re crying,” Jugo said.

The three boys patted Kouki on the shoulder. That, too, brought Kouki some much-needed solace.

Conversation started up again among the students, and they started talking about the “special day” that Noboru had mentioned. Swallowing his sobs, Kouki gave everyone a weak smile and returned to his food. Around the time everyone had finished eating, Helina came into the office.

“Princess, my apologies for disturbing your meal.”

“Helina.”

Helina looked over at Aiko and Yuka, then smiled and said, “I bring word from Nagumo-sama. He says ‘the preparations are complete.’”

The students exchanged glances, their eyes sparkling with hope.

Today was a momentous day for the Hoelscher Empire.

“I have nothing but respect for the brave warriors who fought and died—”

There was a speech being given in the main square, which was filled to the brim with people. There were even people crowding the

windows of the nearby buildings to try to get a look at the podium.

The leaders of the continent's various nations, as well as the church's top brass, were in attendance, sitting in front-row seats that had been set aside for them.

Though it sounded like a memorial speech, that wasn't actually what this was. That speech had already been delivered the day after Ragnarok, at the plains where the battle had taken place. Everyone who'd survived the battle had attended that speech, as well as hundreds of thousands of civilians who'd teleported in thanks to the portals Hajime had set up at all the major cities in the world.

No, today's ceremony was for a completely different occasion.

"I hope this ceremony actually manages to start changing people's minds..."

"Yeah, when the Haulia went on a rampage and forced the empire to free all its slaves, the people were more confused than anything else. I don't think it did anything to change their prejudiced mindset."

"Well, I think it'll work out. At least from what I can tell."

Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou were watching the speech from one of the castle's balconies. Indeed, this ceremony was celebrating the signing of a peace treaty between Verbergen and the Hoelscher Empire, which would hopefully also change the way its people treated beastmen.

Standing on the left side of the podium were Gahard and his retainers, while on the right stood Ulfric, the other elders of Verbergen, and Cam. The peace treaty was held by a dignitary between the two leaders and would be signed once the speeches were done.

Ryutarou smiled as he examined the crowd and gauged their mood.

"Humans and beastmen risked their lives together during Ragnarok, and even the people who weren't there saw how well they fought together through Nagumo's artifacts. At this point, I think you're more likely to be ostracized if you start spouting that prejudiced crap about how beastmen didn't receive god's grace."

"True. Everyone realized it doesn't matter whether you possess mana or not. It'll probably be hard for humans and beastmen to get along right away, but at least people's views are changing," Shizuku replied.

"Simon-san's actually been doing his job for once too," Suzu added, thinking back to the church's proclamation.

Pope Simon had released an official statement saying that the church would henceforth consider beastmen fully people, rather than subhuman. It also made it a sacrilegious offense to do otherwise. The people hadn't really needed too much urging, though, since they'd

seen how much aid the dragonmen had rendered during Ragnarok, and moreover, the party that had invaded the Sanctuary to slay Ehitruje had included a rabbitman and a dragonman. Both of them were now legendary heroes who'd go down in history. Anyone who tried to disparage their species wouldn't find many friends among the people of Tortus.

Indeed, it wasn't just in the Hoelscher Empire where attitudes toward beastmen were changing, but in every human country. Even those unwilling to change found they could no longer openly espouse racist views.

Ragnarok had already brought the two races together better than any speech could have. It was a delicious bit of irony that it was Ehitruje, the man who'd promoted those racist views in the first place, that everyone had come together to rally against.

"Hey, that's rude, Suzu! I know he's not the most serious of popes, but he does his work properly."

"I mean..." Suzu mumbled as she glanced down at the podium, looking at the person giving the speech. She then pointed her out with a finger and continued, "Kaorin nearly fainted when he pushed the responsibility of giving today's speech and being the witness for the peace treaty signing onto her."

Shizuku averted her gaze, unable to argue with it. Indeed, when he'd been told of his duties, Simon had immediately turned to Kaori and said, "You're a more fitting representative than I am, so I'll let you take care of it!"

"Kaorin was a huge bundle of nerves back in the waiting room, but now that she's onstage, she's doing a pretty good job... She even looks like a saint."

"What is it the people are calling her now, the Black-Silver Saint? The Haulia seem to really love that name."

"Don't tell that to Kaori. Remember how embarrassed she was when they all started cheering it?"

Ragnarok had been a fierce battle, and frankly, it wouldn't have been surprising if casualties had been much, much higher. But in the end, of the people who'd died, only thirty percent had been disintegrated so thoroughly that they couldn't be revived, or had been dead for too long. That was all thanks to Kaori's efforts, as she'd continued keeping her healing magic going even in the midst of a pitched battle with the apostles. To the soldiers, she was more like a healing saint than a battle valkyrie.

Both the Hoelscher Empire and Verbergen had wanted her present for the ceremony, and though it was irresponsible of him, Simon had been right when he'd said she was better suited to give this speech than him. Shizuku and the others had tagged along to give her moral

support.

Finally, Kaori brought the speech to a close, and Gahard and Ulfric strode forward to sign the peace treaty. The two of them looked at each other, with Kaori standing in between them. This was undoubtedly a historic moment.

As they were watching, Shizuku heard a dismissive voice from the corner of the balcony.

“Hmph, it’s simply not right that our leader, a man dedicated to a life in the shadows, has to be present for such a public ceremony.”

It was obvious from her tone who she was, and in a way, that showed that Haulia stood out more than anyone else despite their skill with assassination.

Shizuku rolled her eyes and said, “Lana-san.”

“Shizuku-sama, please address me by my proper name, Lanain—”

“Lana-san.”

“Hmph!”

She was a very pretty woman, but the way she covered her face with one hand and tried to look extremely cool while walking away ruined any effect her beauty might have had.

“Umm, shouldn’t you be down there too?” Suzu asked timidly.

Lana stopped, and her bunny ears started twitching nervously. She stopped trying to make a cool pose and blushed a little as she said, “K-Kou-kun said he’d rather watch from up here, so...”

“Kou-kun...”

Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou said in harmony.

“Umm, I’d prefer it if you guys didn’t call me that, Yaegashi-san. It’s...embarrassing.”

Shizuku turned in surprise and saw a shadow moving in the corner of the room.

“Endou-kun, you were here?!” Shizuku and Suzu exclaimed.

“Don’t scare me like that, Endou!” Ryutarou shouted.

“I wasn’t trying to. I’ve been here with Lana this whole time.”

Indeed, Kousuke Endou, the man with less presence than even air, had been watching along with everyone else.

Shizuku and the others tried to calm their pounding hearts. They’d managed to survive a life-and-death struggle in the Sanctuary, but even that hadn’t given them the ability to sense Kousuke when he was right in front of them. Granted, Kousuke’s powers had evolved considerably after he’d awoken to his true calling during Ragnarok. Now, he was harder to notice than ever before.

“I got a message from Nagumo, by the way. He’s almost ready. We should probably head back once the ceremony is done. I actually came here so we could all return together.”

“Really? Why did Hajime contact you instead of me?” Shizuku

asked with a small pout.

"You've gotten pretty close with Nagumo-kun recently, I noticed," Suzu said.

"Yeah. You're the only guy in our class who actually spends time with him, now that I think about it," Ryutarou mused.

In truth, Kousuke and Hajime got along surprisingly well, and the two of them had become good friends over the past month.

Puffing her chest out proudly, Lana said, "Of course! Kou-kun's abilities have been recognized by Boss! He's going to become his right-hand man, the Demon Lord's dagger in the dark!"

"That's the first I've heard of that!" everyone, including Kousuke, exclaimed. Shizuku and the others all turned to Lana, who seemed puzzled by their surprise.

"What's so strange about that? I told you guys too, didn't I? Even though I'm dating Kou-kun now, I'm still Boss's loyal subordinate."

"Yeah, you mentioned something like that, I think," Kousuke said.

"Which means you're his subordinate too, Kou-kun."

"Is that how it works?"

"Obviously. And since you're way stronger than any of us Haulia, that makes you Boss's right-hand man."

"Y-Yeah. Wait, what?"

"Let's serve Boss faithfully together, Kou-kun!"

"...Okay!" Kousuke looked completely taken aback for a while, but after seeing Lana's dazzling smile, he decided whatever she wanted was good enough for him.

Are you really okay with that, Endou-kun? Shizuku thought with a worried smile.

"Well, I guess he did literally go through hell to win Lana-san's heart," Shizuku mused.

"She told him he had to conquer at least one labyrinth and manage to land a scratch on Nagumo-kun in a duel if he wanted to date her, right? That was basically a polite way of saying no, wasn't it?" Suzu added.

"But then, he actually went and did it... The guy's amazing," Ryutarou concluded, impressed.

After Ragnarok, Kousuke had tried his best to win Lana's affection, and after persevering through multiple rejections, she'd finally tasked him with those insane conditions if he wanted to date her. To everyone's surprise, he'd actually pulled it off.

He went missing for a week, then showed up covered in wounds and with the ability to use gravity magic. He'd then challenged Hajime to a duel and managed to land a hit on him.

As a man, Hajime had, of course, had no intention of going easy on Kousuke and negating the point of the challenge. He'd been able to

tell just how serious Kousuke was and understood how determined Kousuke was to win Lana's legitimate approval. Thus, he'd gone all out against Kousuke. And yet, Kousuke had still managed to injure him.

It was true that Hajime hadn't fully healed from his battle with Ehitruje, and that Kousuke's rather chuuni antics had brought back his own dark past and shaken him mentally, but that didn't change the fact that Kousuke's reckless kamikaze attack had still put a scratch on Hajime's cheek.

After that, he'd given Lana a truly heartfelt confession and she'd been moved enough to reciprocate his feelings. Even Hajime had been impressed by Kousuke's manly display. Moreover, the Haulia had given Kousuke a super edgy nickname the same way they had Hajime, and if Kousuke and Lana really did get married, that would make Kousuke a member of the Haulia, so to Hajime, Kousuke was practically family.

Unsurprisingly, the two had started getting along pretty well after that.

"I still have business I need to take care of here, so I'll be staying in the Hoelscher Empire...which is why I want to spend as much time with Kou-kun as I can before you all go," Lana explained, blushing a little again.

"L-Lana... Hehehe..."

As the days passed, her feelings for Kousuke grew stronger and stronger. Whatever her thoughts might have been when she first agreed to date him, she seemed to genuinely like him now. Though in a way, it was a little sad that her chuuni mannerisms didn't change at all, nor did her loyalty toward Hajime despite the fact that she was falling in love with Kousuke.

"Well, I guess if Endou's fine with it, it's not our place to say anything..." Shizuku muttered.

"Endou-kun's really amazing. I think he's the only one of us who actually got stronger *after* Ragnarok."

"Yeah, for all of our efforts, we haven't really gotten much stronger since... I can see why Hajime thinks so highly of him."

Without Miledi, the trials and traps of the Reisen Gorge had all become automated, and the final fight was with a regular golem instead of her, so it had become a little easier to clear. As a result, Hajime was getting worried people who weren't worthy might be able to clear it and had added a few living golems of his own to the labyrinth. Since those golems had Gatling guns and missiles and pile bunkers, it was possible he'd actually made the labyrinth harder than it had been when he'd cleared it. However, he hadn't done anything to any of the other labyrinths. He figured that now that everyone knew

the truth, if someone wanted to challenge the Labyrinths and gain the Liberators' powers for themselves, that was on them.

Strictly speaking, if they wanted to avoid someone with wicked intentions going in and clearing the Labyrinths, it would have been best to destroy them, but neither Hajime nor his comrades could bring themselves to defile the dungeons that also served as the graves of the Liberators.

At any rate, the point was that Kousuke had cleared what was probably now the hardest Labyrinth, and he'd earned Hajime's respect for it.

"Oh, they're finally signing the treaty," Suzu said, and everyone looked down at the podium again.

Gahard and Ulfric signed the treaty, exchanged a firm handshake, and Kaori announced that it was now in effect.

Cheers rang out from the crowd. Though this was just a peace treaty, and not a true alliance, everyone knew this was the moment that humans and beastmen had joined hands to build a brighter future together.

Shizuku and the others smiled as well. But then—"Oh, it's the chief!"

Cam started striking extremely strange poses as the two leaders shook hands, and for a moment, Shizuku wondered if he'd left his sense of shame back in the forest. Gahard and the others covered their faces with their hands, and Kaori's expression stiffened. The silence that followed was painful.

"Nice going, chief. You nailed it," Lana said with a grin.

Kaori was the first to recover and she quickly announced the construction of a beastmen embassy in the Hoelscher Empire to promote goodwill between the two nations. She also went on to explain that the Haulia would be its ambassadors, and for a moment, everyone wondered if they heard right.

Unfortunately, they hadn't, and indeed a few Haulia would be permanently stationed in the Hoelscher Empire at all times. Lana was, in fact, one of the ones who'd volunteered to serve as ambassador.

Both the imperial ministers who'd been informed of this beforehand and the rank-and-file soldiers who were hearing this for the first time despaired at the announcement. The regular citizens, who didn't know how terrifying the Haulia could be, just looked happy to have this seemingly cheerful rabbitman as an ambassador and clapped wholeheartedly.

"The common people are probably better off not knowing what the Haulia are really like," Suzu muttered, and Shizuku nodded emphatically.

A short while later, Kaori returned to the group.

“Fwaaaaaah! Shizuku-chan, I’m so tiiiiiiired.”

She walked into the room, staggering a little, then went over to Shizuku, who was lounging on a sofa, and collapsed on top of her, resting her head atop Shizuku’s lap.

“Ha ha ha, you did good out there. You looked really cool, Kaori,” Shizuku said as she gently stroked Kaori’s hair, and Kaori closed her eyes contentedly. “Now that you’ve finished your last job, it’s time to say goodbye to this hair and this body, isn’t it?”

“Hmm, yeah, probably. I’m not going to be showing up in public as an apostle anymore...so it’s about time I went back to my original body.”

“Yue-onee-sama mentioned she could reforge your original body into one as strong as an apostle, didn’t she?” Suzu asked, watching with a smile as Shizuku and Kaori cuddled up together. Kaori sat up and nodded to Suzu.

“Yep. Yue and Tio both have unnaturally long life spans, and at this point, Hajime-kun probably does too. I told them if they were all going to outlive me in my original body, I’d rather just stay in this apostle one, but then...”

Yue had strongly pushed for Kaori to return to her original body. She’d wanted Kaori to greet her parents as her original self, to put them at ease when they returned. She’d even offered to use one of the techniques she’d learned from Ehitruje when he’d been possessing her body—the ability to create apostles—to strengthen Kaori’s original body if that was what it took. She’d apostleify Kaori’s body, increasing its life span and making it as strong as Hajime’s and the others’.

Kaori had known Yue was willing to do all this because she cared about Kaori, and her family, and Kaori had graciously taken her up on her offer.

“She really just won’t let anyone else win. Not only is she the adult of the group now...she’s even declared herself first wife,” Kaori stated as she made a pouting face, but her tone was happy. She still saw Yue as her ultimate rival, but at the same time, she really did care for her, and she trusted her more than anyone other than Hajime.

“Oh, uhhh, does that mean Shizuku’s gonna get that power up too?” Ryutarou asked somewhat awkwardly. Shizuku blushed and fidgeted a little.

“Hmm, eventually, I guess?” she said hesitantly.

“You’ve become Boss’s woman too, Shizuku-sama, so you need to be more confident! Oh, Kou-kun, since she’s also part of Boss’s family, we need to show her proper respect.”

“Lana-san, how many times do I have to tell you to phrase that more elegantly?! You make it sound like we’re some kind of mafia!”

Shizuku said.

“Considering the way Nagumo normally acts, we may as well be,” Kousuke muttered with a weary smile on his face.

“Not you too, Endou-kun! Besides, that would make you the don’s hit man! Are you really okay with that?!”

“W-Well, I mean...yeah.”

Kousuke averted his gaze, and Kaori grinned at him. As he and Lana had grown closer, they’d naturally gone to the next step in their relationship, and it seemed that Kousuke was fine with being a hit man or an assassin or whatever if it meant he got to keep making out with her. Suzu seemed to have picked up on the nuance of his response as well, and she grinned too.

In an attempt to change the subject, Kousuke got to his feet and clapped his hands. As he took the Gate Key out of his pocket, Lana turned to him.

“See you later, Kou-kun. I’ll head back tomorrow too.”



“See you then, Lana,” Kousuke replied with a tiny hint of sadness in his voice. He didn’t want to be separated from Lana for even a day. Though they’d only been dating for a short while, to the onlookers, it was clear they were already as close as husband and wife at this point.

Kousuke cleared his throat and began to activate the key.

“Hey, hey, hey! Don’t just leave without even saying anything, you guys!” Gahard said, bursting into the room right as the portal opened.

“Oh, do you need something, Your Majesty?” Shizuku asked with a slight frown, and Gahard glared at her.

“Don’t tell me you forgot! You promised to remove these collars once the peace treaty was signed!”

“Oh...”

“Wait, you actually forgot?!”

It was clear from Shizuku’s expression that she had indeed forgotten. Seeing as no one else had reminded her, everyone other than Lana had forgotten too.

“Hehehe, this is a life-and-death matter for the imperial family, but I see that’s not of much importance to you guys,” Lana said with a chuckle, and Gahard turned his furious gaze onto her.

“If you want us to be friends, you can’t keep holding our lives in your hands. It was Verbergen that said we were going to be equals, remember?”

Gahard and his family were indeed still wearing Necklaces of Vows, which the Haulia had forced onto them when they’d made Gahard release all the beastmen slaves and also stop persecuting them. If they ever broke their word, the necklace would immediately kill all of them.

Shizuku and the others had naturally forgotten about that fateful day Cam’s Haulia had raided the imperial castle, but Gahard sure hadn’t. And today, he’d been promised that if he signed a peace treaty with Verbergen, he’d be able to have those necklaces removed. Ulfric had suggested that concession and the elders had unanimously agreed to it, as had Cam. Thus, the rest of the imperial family was in another room waiting to get their necklaces removed.

Incidentally, it was Shizuku who was holding on to the artifact that would remove them.

“I-I swear I didn’t forget,” Shizuku said, but her words weren’t very convincing.

“.....” Gahard simply glared daggers at her.

Shizuku coughed awkwardly and took the artifact out of her Treasure Trove.

“For now, let’s make sure it works by testing it on you, Your

Majesty.”

Gahard wordlessly held up the necklace. Shizuku tapped the red jewel at its center with what looked like a conductor’s baton. Both the jewel and the baton glowed for a few seconds, then went dark.

“That should have done it.”

“Are you sure?”

Considering he would die if it was still working and he removed it, Gahard’s caution was understandable.

“Oh, stop being such a coward. Take it off and find out,” Lana said, striding over to him.

“Hey, stop!”

She grabbed the necklace and lifted it over his head.

“This is why no one likes the Haulia...” Gahard grumbled, very much alive.

“Seems like it worked,” Ryutarou said, breathing a sigh of relief. Even he’d been a little scared at Lana’s recklessness.

It didn’t look like Gahard was foaming at the mouth or in extreme pain or anything either, so he was probably fine. He let out the breath he’d been holding, and in an attempt to get back at Lana a little, he grinned intimidatingly at her and said, “Looks like I can finally get my revenge on you now.”

It was Shizuku, not Lana, who responded to the joking threat.

“Oh, I have a message for you from Hajime. ‘Don’t cause any trouble. If you do, I’ll give the Haulia a few Hyperion lasers and some meteors to throw at your empire.’”

“I’ll protect the peace, don’t worry,” Gahard said, his expression suddenly turning serious. As the leader of an empire where people only followed the strong, he knew the consequences of opposing Hajime.

“Wait, Boss is going to give us a present if you attack? Well, bring it on, then!” Lana said, taunting him. She was a Haulia through and through.

“Oh, shut up! You guys already have more than enough artifacts from that guy! All the ones he gave us are ashes now! It’s not fair!” Gahard roared and stamped his feet in genuine frustration.

Indeed, after Ragnarok, Hajime had collected all of the artifacts he’d given the soldiers and disposed of them. He hadn’t wanted to mess with the military balance between the nations of the world.

A few might have survived the purge, but not enough to make a tactical difference at least. After that exhausting final battle, there hadn’t been too many soldiers willing to try to sneak away with Hajime’s artifacts. Plus, they’d all had to travel through *his* portals to get home, so he’d had everyone who stepped through one inspected.

Once he recreated the Compass of Eternal Paths, he’d be able to

use it to track down any artifacts that had managed to slip away too. Everyone knew they couldn't hide from Hajime, so they weren't even trying. Unless someone wanted to commit a very roundabout suicide by purposely incurring Hajime's ire, there was no reason for them to try to sneak his artifacts home with them.

Apparently, Gahard had gotten on his hands and knees and begged Hajime to let him at least keep his set of artifacts, but that had just annoyed Hajime, so he'd destroyed them all in front of his eyes. Only the Haulia had been spared the artifact purge. For one thing, they were Hajime's family now, and for another, he'd figured they'd need some firepower just in case the empire tried anything funny.

Naturally, Gahard hadn't liked that one bit.

"Umm, Your Majesty. Hajime handed me something to give you as well."

"What is that? A bomb or something? You want me to carry it now that our necklaces are gone?"

"Not at all."

Shizuku understood Gahard's apprehension when it came to Hajime, but fortunately, he'd been nice this time around.

The moment he saw the ring Shizuku took out and handed to him, his expression brightened considerably.

"Wh-Whoa. Is this...?"

"It doesn't come equipped with any weapons, and it's only big enough for one person, but inside that Treasure Trove is your very own personal airship. The Treasure Trove was made to fit just it, so you won't be able to store anything else there. You mentioned the last time you rode Fernir that you wanted an airship of your own, so he made one for you as a token of friendship. But don't get any weird ideas, or—"

"I would never betray my best friend's wishes!" Gahard exclaimed, suddenly very happy with Hajime. He kept his expression stern though, which must have taken considerable effort.

Suzu and Ryutarou looked at him and said, "You know, when he's like this, he just seems like a kind old man."

"Yeah, I feel like he's been bullied more than he's actually bullied other people."

The imperial family would have died of shame if they'd heard that, but Gahard didn't seem to care at all.

"Well played, Boss. You understand how to play good cop, bad cop better than anyone!" Lana said appreciatively.

"It's kind of scary how well he manages to read people," Kousuke murmured.

Gahard hadn't expected to receive such a lavish gift, so he was truly overjoyed.

“Holy shit, an airship just for me. That’s insane. Man, screw being emperor, I’m going to become an adventurer and fly all over the world.”

It was quite possible a new emperor might soon be born for an extremely dumb reason.

Unable to watch any longer, Shizuku turned her back to him. It wasn’t that she couldn’t bear to see an old man get all excited like a kid. No, the reason was much more sinister.

I-I can’t tell him. I can’t let him know that Lily and Cam have remote self-destruct switches for the airship...

Hajime had put a self-destruct system in place just in case Gahard tried to use his mini-Fernir to invade another country.

When she thought back to the smiles Liliana and Cam had given Hajime when he explained the self-destruct switch to them, Shizuku felt even more certain she couldn’t ever tell Gahard about its existence. She looked over at Kaori, who also knew the truth, and the two of them silently made a pact not to mention a word of this to Gahard. Lana, who also knew, grinned slyly to herself.

A few seconds later, Gahard’s aides came in to check on him. He hadn’t returned for some time, so they were getting worried. That reminded Shizuku of the fact that they were wasting time, so she got back to business.

“Ahem! All right, Your Majesty, let’s go get those necklaces off the rest of your family.”

“Of course! Thank you very much!”

Gahard nodded, still in a very good mood. Unfortunately, his good mood loosened his tongue, and he said something he really shouldn’t have.

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot to mention. Shizuku, it’s a shame that you were taken from me, but if it’s my best friend Hajime Nagumo, then I suppose I can allow it. Congratulations.”

“Huh? What are you congratulating me for?”

“Why, losing your virginity, of—”

Shizuku silently drew her blade and slashed right at Gahard’s neck.

“Shizuku-chan stooooooooop!”

Kaori had to use Godspeed to move fast enough to stop Shizuku’s slice.

“Get out of my way, Kaori! I’m going to kill him!”

“You can’t! Think about how it would look if after a ceremony to celebrate the signing of a peace treaty, the speech giver’s best friend kills one of the signatories!”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to physically kill him, just cut up his soul a bit!”

“Sh-Shizushizu?! His neck’s bleeding...” Suzu said hesitantly, staring at Gahard’s neck. It was a thin cut for sure, but he was undeniably bleeding.

Ryutarou walked over to Gahard to defend him in case Shizuku tried anything else.

“Umm, are you okay, Your Majesty?”

“I’m a hair’s breadth from death, do I look okay?” Gahard asked, his tone serious once more.

“Get him, Shizuku-sama!” Lana shouted, and Kousuke had to calm her down.

Hearing the commotion, Cam and the other Haulia filed in.

“Oh, are we at war already? All right, let’s get those necklaces back on them!”

Cam seemed to have misunderstood the situation, and he drew his blade without hesitation. The moment he did, Gahard and his ministers paled. They still remembered the slaughter the Haulia had carried out in the imperial palace.

“The Haulia...they’re going on a rampage again!”

“Run! They’re going to kill us allllllllll!”

“Someone save ussssss!”

Almost immediately, the palace fell into a panic. A few minutes later, Ulfric, the other elders, and their guards burst into the palace.

“What the heck is going on here...?” Ulfric muttered, his eyes rolling back into his head. They’d literally *just* signed a peace treaty and now this had happened.

“U-Ulfric-sama’s fallen unconscious while standing up...”

“Medic! We need a medic!”

The chaos spread, and Kaori and the others were stuck in the palace for so long that Yue got worried and teleported in to check on them. Once she realized what was going on, she immediately overpowered everyone and forcibly calmed everyone down.

In the southern continent, the demon kingdom Garland’s capital was almost completely abandoned. It was situated at the confluence of a large forest and a mountain range, and the streets were filled with rows and rows of empty rust-red buildings. It had been a lively city just a few months ago, but now it was a ghost town. Beautiful though the place was, with no one in it that beauty became rather eerie.

Tio and Shea looked out over the city from a balcony on the highest floor of the Demon Lord’s castle.

“I’m sorry for dragging you here with me, Shea.”

“I don’t mind. I would have just kept being attacked by Altena if I’d stayed in Verbergen.”

“I-I suppose so. She has been getting bolder recently.”

“Yeah, I was actually thinking of bringing her with us, then dumping her here in the southern forest,” Shea said with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes on her face, making Tio shiver a little.

The young elf princess was absolutely obsessed with Shea, and the problem was that the harsher Shea was to her, the more Altena enjoyed it. She’d even started messing with Cam solely so that she could enjoy his whipping. Unsurprisingly, her grandfather Ulfric was quite distraught at what she’d become. Though still, Altena’s masochism was nothing compared to Tio’s.

Noticing Shea’s judging look, Tio averted her gaze. She then cleared her throat loudly and changed the topic.

“At any rate, let us get on with today’s business.”

Her expression turned serious, and Shea stepped back to watch over Tio, a strange expression on her face.

Tio’s Treasure Trove glowed...and a bouquet of flowers appeared in her hand.

“May the skies and the winds reunite you,” Tio said solemnly, summoning a gust of wind as she threw the bouquet into the sky. The flowers’ sky-blue petals scattered across the capital.

She was holding a small funeral for Freid Bagwa and Uranos. Though they’d been their enemy, Tio had respected the bond the two—man and dragon—had forged. If reincarnation was real, she hoped that they would be reunited in their next life, and be able to soar freely without the malicious influence of a cruel god.

She offered a silent prayer in their name as she watched the petals flutter to the ground.

“You really are a dragonman through and through, Tio-san.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you’re really noble.”

Shea hadn’t witnessed Freid’s and Uranos’s final moments. She’d been safely ensconced in Tio’s arms at that moment, so she didn’t know what Tio had seen in their eyes before they’d died, or what she’d felt the moment she slew them. As far as Shea was concerned, Freid had just been an annoying thorn in their side ever since they’d first met.

“Freid managed to conquer the Frost Caverns. In which case, he must have faced his contradictions and overcome his weaknesses. I find it hard to believe he managed to do so while under Ehitruje’s thrall, so he must have had his own strong convictions that drove him to clear that labyrinth.”

Of course, when they’d first faced Freid, he’d sounded like a religious fanatic, so he’d likely already fallen under Ehit’s control. But even if he’d been a pure soul before that, Shea couldn’t bring herself to care enough to pray that he found peace in the afterlife. She

realized it was callous of her, and she smiled bitterly.

Tio had said she'd dragged Shea along, but in truth, it was Shea who'd wanted to come. She respected Tio for sticking to her noble principles and wanted to watch over her during this funeral.

"Do you wish you could have saved them?" Shea asked curiously.

"Not at all," Tio said with a surprising amount of conviction.

"I don't pity them, nor do I regret my actions. They were enemies that needed to be defeated, and in that battle, we both gave it our all, taking things to their natural conclusion."

Tio's conviction hadn't wavered back then, and it certainly wouldn't in the future.

She looked up at the sky and added, "But you know, at the very end, even though it had lost half of its body, that dragon tried to protect its master, and he in turn chose to perish along with his beloved partner. The two of them understood each other, and I think the bond they had was beautiful."

That was why Tio would remember them, even if she didn't regret killing them.

"This offering is something I chose to do out of selfishness. You say I'm noble, Shea, but in truth, I'm simply doing this to satisfy my own ego."

Tio looked over her shoulder at Shea, and she looked so dazzling that for a moment that Shea closed her eyes.

There was a few seconds of silence, then Shea shrugged and said, "If you say so."

"I do indeed say so," Tio replied with a slight smile.



Just then, there was a knock on the balcony door. Tio called for the visitor to enter, and a Templar Knight in full armor nervously walked in and gave a stiff salute.

“M-My apologies for bothering you, Haulia-dono, Klarus-dono! We were about to eat lunch and were wondering if we should prepare meals for you ladies as well...”

“Thanks for the offer, but we were actually about to head out, David-san,” Shea replied, looking somewhat taken aback. When she’d first met David, he’d spat at her and called her bunny ears disgusting, so it was strange to hear him address her with so much respect now.

“As you wish, my lady.”

“By the way, David-dono,” Tio said, turning back to him.

“Klarus-dono, there’s no need to address me with such respect! Please just call me the Goddess’s loyal servant!”

“That’s way too long.”

David bowed as low as he possibly could, which made Tio give him a disapproving look.

Poor Aiko. She must have a hard time dealing with this man.

All of Aiko’s guards who’d survived Ragnarok were now worshipping her as their new goddess, and their overzealous faith was turning them into fanatics in the same way the old worshippers of Ehit had been.

In their defense, they’d been indoctrinated by the church from their youth, and the destruction of the Sacred Mountain and the shocking truth that their religion had all been a sham had been a bigger shock to them than to the regular people. Moreover, even if the rest of the world didn’t exactly worship her, the people of Tortus all *did* see Aiko as a goddess. It was hardly surprising that the people most in need of an object of worship to turn to would choose her. Simon had even said it was okay. Though naturally, Aiko found their devotion rather terrifying.

Incidentally, there was a reason why David and the other Templar Knights were here in the Demon Lord’s castle.

“Setting the matter of address aside, how are the demons faring? Have you run into any problems?” Tio asked.

“No, my lady. They’ve been perfectly docile.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Not all of the demons had entered the Sanctuary with Freid. Aside from the ones that had been left behind in the Demon Lord’s castle and terrorized by Hajime, there had been a surprising number of demons who’d opposed the empire’s policies and had chosen to live out in hidden hamlets scattered throughout the southern continent. They’d heard about what had happened to the empire’s capital and

had started coming out of hiding little by little.

“They seem to have high hopes for the project and have been cooperating fully with us. No one has done anything suspicious in the Sealed Room either.”

“I thought we might have trouble when I learned all the demons who had gone to the Sanctuary got spat back out here when it was destroyed, but I guess everything’s okay?” Shea said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Indeed, the demons who’d gone to the Sanctuary hadn’t died with it. They’d instead been dropped back into their capital, all of them in a coma.

A combination of restoration and spirit magic was enough to wake them up, but right now Heiligh was busy rebuilding their capital and wouldn’t be able to withstand an attack from a demon army.

Of course, no one expected the demons to invade again anytime soon with their empire in tatters, but they were still a potential threat. Thus, Hajime had created a massive underground space beneath the demon capital and sealed all of the comatose demons in there for now. The room had its time stopped thanks to another one of Hajime’s artifacts, and the plan was to slowly release the demons from their slumber after Heiligh was fully restored and the human kingdoms had the resources to handle any potential conflict. Liliana and the others did, of course, want to work with the demons, but that would be easier to accomplish if they took things slowly.

The demons who’d been living in their hidden villages until now had all agreed to this plan as well. They were the ones keeping the capital maintained, and they’d offered to mediate between the humans and the other demons when they were finally woken up. In truth, they’d already managed to convince the demons who’d been left behind at the Demon Lord’s castle to give up their hatred for humans, which was why that group hadn’t been sealed away along with the comatose crowd.

David and the others had been stationed here to keep an eye on the demons in case they tried anything drastic. There was a portal connecting this city to Heiligh, so it wasn’t a permanent post and they rotated in and out. Eventually, the hope was diplomats would be traveling back and forth between the continents constantly as the two races joined forces and worked together.

“It would be nice if humans and demons learned to cooperate,” Tio said, mostly to herself.

“For sure. I bet that’s exactly the kind of future Miledi-san and the other Liberators were hoping to create,” Shea replied.

It was precisely because that had been Miledi’s dream that Hajime had come up with this plan. He’d claimed that he just didn’t want to

deal with the logistics of massacring hundreds of thousands of people, but Shea and Tio both knew he'd been moved by Miledi's idealism.

"All right, we should probably head back," Shea said.

"Indeed," Tio replied. "Goodbye, David."

"Please give my regards to Aiko-sama, Tio-dono."

Shea smiled a little to herself, amazed by how much David had transformed since she'd last met him, and stepped through the portal leading to where Hajime was.

Tio cast one last glance over the capital and thought, *Freid. It was you who saved the demon race, wasn't it?*

She remembered Freid's and Uranos's final moments. When Uranos had sacrificed himself to buy a few more seconds for Freid, he'd activated the obelisk one last time.

At the time, Tio had thought he'd tried to activate one final attack, but now she knew he'd actually teleported the demons out to safety.

"I pray the day comes when these streets are once more filled with the smiles and laughter of your people."

With that, Tio turned around and stepped through the portal as well.

In one corner of Verbergen, there sat a rather oddly shaped hut. Most buildings in the city were built atop the branches of the larger trees and made of wood, but this particular hut was made of white metal and sat on the ground.

Hajime, his classmates, and Aiko had spent the past month in Verbergen, since it was the most comfortable city to them, and this particular hut was attached to the large lodge they'd been staying in. The hut itself was too small to house anyone, but Hajime was inside it right now.

A pale blue light emanated from the cracks underneath the closed door. It was coming from a fifteen-centimeter-wide crystal resting atop a cylindrical pedestal that went up to waist height. Hajime's eyes were closed in deep concentration and had both of his hands on the pedestal. Crimson sparks went into the pale blue crystal and were absorbed.

Though Hajime had spent a good deal of the past month helping with the capital's restoration, disseminating an almost-true history to the masses, and restoring the Liberators' honor, that wasn't all he'd been up to. In fact, the bulk of his time had been spent here in this hut. His primary goal remained unchanged—getting back home to his parents—and he'd been working on making that happen. It had just taken a lot of time to prepare the raw materials for the artifact he was going to make.

The door to the hut creaked open a few centimeters and a timid voice asked, "Daddy, can I come in?"

Myu knew Hajime was in the middle of something very important, so she didn't want to disturb him if he needed to concentrate.

Hajime opened his eyes and a smile creased his face.

"Of course you can."

Myu swung the door open wide and rushed over to Hajime. Remia was also there, standing in the doorway with a gentle smile on her face.

"Huh, where's Yue-onee-chan?" Myu asked.

"She went to the empire. Apparently, there was a commotion or something."

"Oh my, is everything okay?" Remia asked in a concerned voice.

"Shizuku, Kaori, and Endou are all there, so I doubt they're in any real danger."

"It's not them I'm worried about. The Haulia are over there too, aren't they? I'm worried for Ulfric-san's sanity."

"....."

Remia's fears were right on the money, and it was indeed at this very moment that Ulfric had fallen unconscious.

Hajime decided not to think about that question, and instead looked down at Myu, who was hugging his leg.

"Daddy, are you almost done making the Divinity Stone?"

"Yeah, I've put enough mana into it that it's usable now, I think," Hajime said as he looked back down at the crystal on the pedestal. He'd spent the past month or so diligently working on making a man-made Divinity Stone.

In order to travel back to his original world, he needed the Crystal Key as well as the Compass of Eternal Paths, but he couldn't imbue concept magic that strong into regular ore, since it would just break after one or two uses. That might have been enough if he was planning on going home and never coming back, but he wasn't.

"Once you're done, we'll be able to go back and forth between your world and mine, right, daddy?"

"Yep, that's right," Hajime said as he took one hand off the pedestal and ruffled Myu's hair.

Myu let out a small mew of happiness and Remia watched the two of them with a gentle smile.

"I mean, it wouldn't be fair if I got to go home, but you and Remia never got to see your home again."

"Fu fu, thank you for doing so much for our sake, Hajime-san."

Remia rested a hand on Hajime's shoulder, letting him know that she had absolute faith in him.

"Yay! That means Tio-onee-chan and Shea-onee-chan can see their

family too!”

“That’s right. Plus, it means we’ll be able to show Cam and Adul-dono Japan too.”

If the best-case scenario was being able to freely go between Earth and Tortus, then naturally, Hajime would do everything in his power to make that a reality.

Hajime had desired to return home so badly that he’d been able to create concept magic that let him, so it stood to reason that the precious comrades he’d made during his journey also cared enough about their own homeland to create concept magic that would let them return to it.

His job had been to create the raw material capable of holding all that concept magic. Something with enough magical affinity that it wouldn’t break no matter how often it was used. And that something had been Divinity Stone.

Ideally, he would have just found some more, but there wasn’t any left in the abyss, and when he’d been out gathering resources in the days leading up to Ragnarok, he’d confirmed with the compass that there wasn’t any in easy reach. There might have been another chunk of Divinity Stone somewhere in Tortus, but now that he’d lost the compass, it wasn’t practical to go looking for it.



And so, he'd decided to make some instead.

"If only I had mana, I could have helped too," Myu said in a sad voice.

"It's fine. I mean, yeah, I'm getting my classmates' help with this, but most people can't really store that much mana in their bodies."

"It normally takes a thousand years for enough mana to concentrate in one spot to create a Divinity Stone, doesn't it?" Remia asked.

"Yeah. It needs to coincidentally happen somewhere where mana naturally gathers too."

The chances of that happening were astronomically low. Mana was a planet's energy given concrete form, and normally, it circulated evenly throughout the world. That flow seldom backed up in such a way that mana naturally pooled and concentrated in a single spot.

Hajime doubted it was a coincidence that such a legendary ore had just so happened to be in the labyrinth made by history's greatest synergist. If he'd been able to come up with the idea of making Divinity Stone, there was no way Oscar hadn't gone down the same thought process. And of course, if it was something Oscar had been capable of, Hajime was confident he could do it as well.

After a good amount of research, Hajime had come up with a way to artificially create Divinity Stone, and the fruits of his research were now right before his eyes.

"It's so cool that there's a little bit of a star in this room!" Myu said with a look of wonder.

"I still can't believe that the stars in the sky are all planets or suns just like our own. It's fascinating," Remia added, echoing Myu's sentiment. Indeed, the room itself was enchanted with gravity magic, whose true nature was to control the power of the planet itself.

The room was gathering the planet's power, or in other words, mana from all over the land and concentrating it here. That mana was then channeled through the pedestal and into a special space made with spatial magic to slowly but surely form into a Divinity Stone. Hajime's classmates, all of whom possessed more mana than the average resident of Tortus, were also pouring whatever excess mana they could spare into this room every single day.

The Divinity Stone had been constantly growing in size, and it was finally large enough to craft both another Compass of Eternal Paths and another Crystal Key. It hadn't quite become so saturated with mana that it started excreting Ambrosia, but since that wasn't the reason Hajime was making this, it wasn't a problem.

"Once we get to my world, it might be nice for you to go to school for a bit, Myu. You'll be able to learn a bunch of stuff, even more than

what I've been able to teach you."

"Wow! Really?"

"Yeah. Plus, you'll be studying with kids your age, so you might even be able to make some friends."

"Friends... You went to school too, right, daddy?"

"Yeah, along with all of my other classmates. Aiko's actually our teacher, you know?"

"Mrrr..."

"What's wrong?"

"Were you able to make any friends there?"

"....."

The question sank into Hajime's heart like a knife. He looked away awkwardly, unable to admit to his beloved daughter that despite going to school for years, he'd made no friends.

"E-Everyone's been talking to Hajime-san a lot more the past few weeks! He's become good friends with Endou-san in particular!"

Remia said, trying to cover for Hajime.

"That's right. Only over the past few weeks," Hajime replied in a dead voice. Remia's attempts had apparently only made things worse.

Hajime realized he'd done this to himself, so he gave up on trying to make himself look good and just decided to tell Myu the truth. For her part, Myu realized she'd asked something she probably shouldn't have, so she seemed to be desperately searching for a way to improve Hajime's mood.

"I can't believe you're making Myu-chan cry," Shea said, striding into the room.

"What's going on?" Tio asked, walking in after her.

Myu broke off from Hajime and ran over to Tio and Shea.

"Umm, you see, I asked daddy if he made any friends at—"

"Let's not tell the others about that, Myu. Okay?" Remia said gently.

"It's fine, Remia. It'll only make things more awkward if I try to hide it. I'm sorry your dad's such a loner, Myu."

That exchange was enough for Shea and Tio to figure out what was going on. They nodded to each other and looked down at Myu, smiling.

"Until I met Yue-san, the only friends I ever had was my family," Shea said.

"And that's nothing compared to me. I lived for five hundred years in the dragonmen village and had not a single person I could call a friend!"

Myu looked up at them in shock. She had tons of friends, both back at home in Erisen and now here in Verbergen, since she'd spent the past month here. On top of that, some of her friends weren't even,

like, people. She was a master of getting along with others, so she found it hard to believe that other people didn't have that many friends.

"Let's talk about something else!"

Wise beyond her years, Myu had realized that this was simply not a good topic to bring up around Hajime or his comrades.

Glad to talk about literally anything else, Hajime took Myu up on her suggestion.

"So, how'd things go with the demons?"

"Fine."

"Indeed. There seem to be no problems for now."

As they gave their report, Shea and Tio sidled up to either side of Hajime and pressed their boobs up against his arms. The fact that he didn't push them away was proof that he'd accepted them all as his lovers.

"Incidentally, I think I like you better with black hair, Master. It matches mine," Tio stated as she reached out and stroked Hajime's decidedly black hair. Hajime wasn't wearing his customary eye patch either. Instead, he had a prosthetic right eye that looked far more human than his old Demon Eye. His prosthetic left arm had also been covered in artificial skin and looked much more like a human arm. He wasn't half-vampire anymore either.

"It still feels kind of weird to me," Shea said.

"Yeah," Myu echoed. The two of them were so used to him with white hair that his old appearance felt weird to them.

"What, you think this look doesn't suit me?"

"Nah, it's not that."

"Yeah, you still look cool, daddy!"

"What Myu said. Besides, you originally had black hair, right?"

"Yep... And I want to look as close to my old self as possible when I return home," Hajime scratched his cheek awkwardly as he said that.

"Well, I can always change my hair color with that metamorphosis magic artifact, and I can swap out my arm and eye at any time. I doubt I'll need them again, but...if we ever have to fight something, I'll go back to looking like I used to."

This was Hajime's way of separating the two parts of himself. The white-haired boy with an eye patch and metal arm was the one who'd fought gods and monsters in another world. But Japan was a peaceful country, and since he was planning on spending the rest of his days in peace, he wanted to look like he used to. It was a way of expressing his desire to change.

"In that case, I hope you get to keep your hair black forever," Shea said, closing her eyes and rubbing her ears against his face. Myu, Remia, and Tio all voiced their agreement.

“That would be nice...” Hajime muttered, smiling. Shea and Tio pressed themselves even more tightly against Hajime, but before they could go any further, Yue appeared.

“Stop acting horny in front of Myu.”

“What?! Yue-san?!” Shea exclaimed.

“Nuwooooh?! Yue, don’t teleport in so suddenly like that! You nearly gave me a heart attack!” Tio roared. Both of them turned back just as Yue bonked them on the head.

Unlike everyone else who needed portals to teleport, Yue was able to use Heavenstep. She was wearing a black gothic lolita dress today, and it fluttered prettily as she alighted to the ground after teleporting in.

In the past, she’d tried to pick clothes that didn’t seem too childish, yet also didn’t seem like she was trying too hard to look grown up, but now that she could change between her regular and adult form at will, she’d embraced all sorts of fashions to fit whichever form she felt like being in on any given day.

“Oh good, you’re back. Is everything okay in the empire?” Hajime asked.

“Mmm, everything’s under control. The Haulia almost went on a rampage and sent the empire into a panic, but I beat them up.”

“I see.”

That didn’t sound okay at all, but Hajime decided not to pry. She walked over and hugged him, and the two of them shared a brief kiss.

“Everyone’s waiting at the plaza. Are you ready?” she asked.

“Yeah, I just finished checking over everything one last time. We’re good to go.”

Hajime looked at Yue, Shea, Tio, Myu, and Remia in turn, then picked up the small Divinity Stone and strode toward the door.

“Let’s go.”

The group left the hut and headed to the same open plaza where Shea’s feelings for Hajime had finally been requited.

Aiko and the students had all been chatting amicably in the plaza, but they fell silent as Hajime approached. They tensed up, feeling nervous.

Kaori and Shizuku, however, were unfazed and they ran up to Hajime. Surprisingly, so did Liliana.

“Oh, wow! You came too, Lily?”

“Yes. I was hoping to see this firsthand.”

Hajime wasn’t planning on returning right away after creating the compass and Crystal Key. For one thing, creating the two artifacts would drain him of practically all of his mana, and though this wasn’t going to be a final farewell or anything, he had also been planning on

going around and saying his goodbyes to the people of this world. Still, as one of the people who'd be left behind on Tortus, Liliana wanted to be able to spend as much time with Hajime as possible.

Hajime nodded to her, then he and Yue made their way to the center of the plaza. The ensuing silence was almost oppressive, and more than one student gulped. Everyone was acting like if they talked, it would cause Hajime to mess up.

"Kaori, we should be fine, but if it looks like we're about to run out of mana, I'll need you to cast restoration magic on us."

"Yep, just leave it to me!"

"Just in case, I don't want anyone else's mana to get mixed up in the actual spell, so—"

"I know, I know. Only restore your mana and nothing else, right?" Kaori replied, nodding, and Hajime nodded back to her. He then turned to Tio and Aiko.

"I'll be counting on you two as well. Though hopefully, your assistance won't be necessary."

"You want us to extend your Limit Break with spirit magic if it looks like it's taking too long to make the artifacts, right? We'll be ready," Aiko said.

"Indeed, all the fail-safes are in place, so there's nothing to worry about."

They were really nothing more than fail-safes; Hajime expected that he and Yue would be able to manage on their own.

Shea grabbed Myu's and Remia's hands and dragged them back a little. Yuka and the others also surrounded Hajime and Yue from a distance, forming a circle around the pair. Feeling everyone's expectant gazes on them, Hajime and Yue turned to each other.

"All right, let's do this, Yue."

"Mmmm..."

Hajime held out his hands. Resting in his right palm was the Divinity Stone, while all the other materials he would need for this artifact were in his left. Yue gently placed her own hands on top of his, covering the materials. Then, the two of them began the process of birthing creation magic into the world.

"Limit Break—Overload."

"Supreme Ascendance."

Crimson and gold light spread out through the forest around Verbergen as Hajime and Yue buffed themselves to their strongest state. A gust of wind blew past everyone, rattling branches and shaking leaves. The two pillars of light grew brighter, then merged into one. And as they merged there was an explosive burst of mana, and a crimson-gold spiral shot up toward the sky. It was as vibrant as the one that had broken through the Sanctuary during Ragnarok. The

sheer power rolling off of the two of them was dense enough to be palpable.

Yuka and the others ducked down, covering their faces, while Shea stood protectively in front of Myu and Remia. As waves of mana washed over everyone, they could feel the heavy, indestructible will contained within it. It was eye-opening to see just how fervent Hajime's desire was.

Everyone other than Shea, Tio, Kaori, and Shizuku—who'd been present the first time Hajime had made the Crystal Key back in the Frost Caverns—gasped in surprise and felt chills run down their spine.

"I want to return home."

"Where lies my homeland?"

"I want to return home."

"Back to my family."

"I want to return home."

"Together with everyone."

The intensity of Hajime's wish made Yuka and the others tear up. Not just because they could feel Hajime's longing, but because they realized they all felt the same way. They missed their homes, their families, and their friends.

Of course, it wasn't as though everyone had a stable, loving, and supportive family. There were students who were rebelling against their parents or found them overbearing. Students who hadn't spoken to their siblings in weeks because of a silly fight or something more serious. Still, everyone felt the overwhelming desire to at least see their family again.

The vague homesickness they'd felt until now solidified into a concrete desire, and the students all began to pray for Hajime's success. It was all they could do for him.

A second later, bright light began spilling from the space between Hajime's and Yue's palms. The Divinity Stone started to glow as it absorbed Hajime's and Yue's mana, which was swirling around it and sparkling like a galaxy.

Hajime, who'd been concentrating intently until now, slowly opened his eyes. In a quiet voice that still carried surprisingly well across the plaza, he said, "Transmute."

The Divinity Stone rose into the air and split into two. The remaining materials in his left hand split up into two piles and went into the respective artifact they'd be making.

The two chunks of Divinity Stone glowed with equal intensity, looking like two miniature suns. It was a breathtaking sight, one the students were sure they'd never forget.

The surging torrent of mana quieted down, and a lull fell over the open square. People let out sighs of amazement, forgetting their

earlier nervousness. It was hard to say whether they were more captivated by the two legendary artifacts being created, or how beautiful Hajime and Yue looked holding hands and leaning into each other. Either way, eventually, the light began to fade, crimson and gold mana dispersing into nothingness among the trees.

Yue took her hands off Hajime's and grabbed the two artifacts floating in the air, the Compass of Eternal Paths and the Crystal Key. After looking them over, she handed them to Hajime.

"Try them out."

"Sure."

Yuka and the others watched on with bated breath. It seemed their nervousness was back. Hajime activated the compass, and a few seconds that felt like an eternity passed. Silently, he then held up the key and checked to see if it could make a portal.

"H-Hey, Nagumo. How's it look? Does it work?" Kousuke asked, unable to bear the suspense any longer.

Hajime looked up and cast his gaze over the gathered students. He then grinned triumphantly and gave them a thumbs-up.

Overjoyed, the students burst out in cheers.

"Hell yeaaaaaaah!" Atsushi, Noboru, and Akito shouted, pumping their fists into the air.

"Th-They did it! We can go home!"

"Come on, Taeko, don't cry."

"You're crying too, Yukacchi!"

Yuka and Taeko hugged each other, tears in their eyes.

"Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! We can finally go home!"

"Nagumo! No, Nagumo-sama! Thank you so much!"

Shinji and Yoshiki clasped each other's arms and started dancing wildly.

"Waaaaaaaaaaah, thank goodness. Nagumo-kun, Yue-san, thank youuuuu!"

"I owe you my life!"

Ayako and Mao were also crying openly and hugging each other.

Jugo, Kentarou, and Kousuke silently high-fived each other, too overcome by emotion to speak.

Aiko breathed a sigh of relief and slumped to the ground, while Liliana gently rubbed her back.

The other students also hugged each other and shed tears of joy. A few of them were so enamored with Hajime and Yue that they started saying things like "I wish I could be Nagumo-sama's pet!" or "I'd love to be Yue-san's dog," which was more than a little worrying, but hopefully that phase would pass.

Hajime let out a long breath and sat down, exhausted from the effort of making the two artifacts. Yue settled down on his lap, looking

similarly spent. Hajime wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer.

“Thank you, Yue.”

“Mmm...”

For a while, Hajime and Yue simply enjoyed each other’s presence, but then a young dagon girl tottered over to them.

“Daddy!”

“Hey, Myu.”

Hajime scooped up Myu in one arm and Yue scooted over a little so he could plop her into his lap as well. She snuggled up against Hajime the same way Yue had.

“Hajime-san, Yue-san, that was amazing! I don’t know how else to describe it; it was just amazing!” Shea said, her ears flopping up and down as she ran over.

“I know you’ve got a bigger vocabulary than that, Shea,” Hajime replied with a wry smile.

Shea settled down on Hajime’s right and wrapped him, Yue, and Myu in one big hug. Hajime took one hand off Myu and patted her bunny ears, while she rested her head on his shoulder.

“You did it, Hajime-kun, Yue!” Kaori exclaimed as she took the spot on Hajime’s left and hugged them all the same way Shea had. Hajime patted her on the head as well, and she also snuggled up against him.

“I look forward to seeing what kind of place your world is, Master,” Tio added, heading toward Hajime.

“You’ll be pretty surprised, I think,” Shizuku replied, also coming up to hug Hajime.

The two of them were officially members of his harem, so they didn’t need to show any restraint. Unfortunately, the only open spot left was at his back, and for a second, Tio and Shizuku glared at each other, trying to silently claim the spot for themselves. But before their silent battle could conclude, Remia stole the remaining spot.

“My, my, if you two don’t want this spot, I’ll be glad to take it. Ufu fu...”

“Mommy!” Myu shouted, reaching out over Hajime’s shoulder to pat her mother’s head.

“Remia-san?!” Shizuku exclaimed in shock.

“Well played,” Tio said through gritted teeth. The moment Remia had decided she would worm her way into Hajime’s harem, she’d gathered the courage to face off against even the world’s strongest swordswoman and the world’s strongest dragonman.

Just then, an intruder to the harem suddenly appeared.

“Shea, I’ve been looking all over for you! Haaah... Haaah, won’t you spend some time with me too?”

“Geh, Altena?!”

Indeed, Altena had managed to sneak up on Shea while she was distracted, and was now panting with excitement as she tried to smother Shea from behind.

In order to fend her off, Shea temporarily moved away from Hajime, and in that moment there were another two girls who tried to squeeze their way in.

“Aiko-san, what do you think you’re doing?”

“That’s what I’d like to know, Lily-san. Do you have some business with my student?”

Aiko and Lily glared at each other. It seemed Aiko had no intention of being the grown-up here and letting Lily have some time with Hajime.

Yuka and the others watched on as everyone tried to get a piece of the Hajime pie. Unsurprisingly, Yuka herself didn’t look all too happy that there were so many girls swarming around him. Nana and Taeko kicked her from behind, hoping to force her into the fray, but she tensed her muscles and stood her ground.

The other girls started gossiping about Hajime’s love life while the guys watched on with a mixture of curiosity and jealousy.

“Sheesh...” Yue said with a sigh.

“H-Hey, Yue?”

Hajime felt a chill run down his spine and timidly looked over at Yue. The vampire princess had been content to stay quiet thus far, but it seemed that had changed.

The cheers stopped as everyone felt the intimidating pressure Yue was exuding. A second later, her body started to glow golden. It was a gentle light that enveloped her entire body, and after a few seconds, she transformed into her adult mode.

“Can’t you at least let us enjoy a few moments of peace?”

Because she’d grown both in height and in bust size, the gothic lolita dress she was wearing no longer fit her properly, revealing quite a bit of her legs, as well as an ample amount of cleavage. The ill-fitting clothes still looked quite captivating though, just in a different way. They’d gone from being cute to sexy, and everyone was transfixed by the sudden change in her appearance.

Yue waved one finger through the air, eliciting a panicked response from Kaori and Remia.

“Awawawa, hold on a sec, Yue!”

“Y-Yue-san what are you doing?!”

The two of them were forced away from Hajime and put down next to Shizuku and Tio.

“Umm, Yue? I think—Mmmpf?!” Hajime tried to calm her down, but she hugged him tight, forcing his face into her boobs and also

shutting him up.

Kaori and the others also protested, while Myu blushed and covered her face with her hands.

In an almost playful tone Yue said, “As the first wife, I’m banning anyone who causes a ruckus from seeing Hajime at night.”

She looked so utterly beautiful as she spoke that everyone, both guys and girls alike, found themselves unable to peel their eyes away from her. Even Tio and Kaori could only blush and look away when Yue stared at them.

“At this point, I don’t think there’s anyone who can match up to Yue-san,” Shea said lightly as she pulled Altena off of her. Unlike the others, she seemed capable of resisting Yue’s charms.

Incidentally, it was obvious from Kaori’s and the others’ reactions what Yue really meant by banning the others from “night visits.”

“As punishment, I’m keeping Hajime all to myself today.”



“Does my opinion count for nothing here?” Hajime asked, though his tone was joking. After all, no matter what happened, he’d always take Yue’s side.

Unsurprisingly, as soon as he pulled himself out of Yue’s boobs, she leaned in for a kiss, which he granted enthusiastically. The girls started gossiping once again while the boys stared up at the sky to keep their emotions in check. It was a nice, clear, sunny day at least.

“Okay, I’m not letting this stand! You can’t abuse your authority like this!” Kaori, who’d recovered from the prison of Yue’s charm, said as she talked over to the two of them.

Tio, who’d also recovered, got up and said, “Hmph, a punishment like that is exactly what I was hoping for, Yue. In fact, I wouldn’t mind if you stepped on me while in that form either.”

It seemed Tio’s masochism had evolved to the point where she was happy with Yue abusing her as well as Hajime.

“Hey, I was trying to enjoy the moment; it’s Altena’s fault that it was ruined! In other words, I don’t deserve any punishment, and you should kiss me right now, Hajime-san!”

Shea strode forward and puckered her lips in preparation for a kiss.

“.....” Shizuku just stared at Hajime with puppy dog eyes, hoping to win his pity.

“Is everyone going to kiss daddy now? I want to too!” Myu exclaimed happily.

“I’m sorry, Myu, but it’s a bit too early for you to be kissing people. Why don’t I kiss him for you?” Remia said, taking Myu out of Hajime’s lap and smiling wolfishly.

“I’m sure... I’m sure it would be okay for me to kiss him, even if I am a princess!”

“It’s not a problem because you’re a princess, it’s a problem because you’re too young, Lily-san! In that respect, I’m a much better choice...” Aiko replied.

“You might be old enough to do lewd things with him, but it’s wrong for a teacher to get romantically involved with their student!” Liliana retorted.

Ignoring all of them, Yue turned to Hajime and asked, “So, Hajime? Who will you pick?”

Naturally, there was only one answer for Hajime.

“You, of course.”

“He he...then I guess it’s time I kidnapped you.”

Yue grinned innocently like a child, and before anyone could react, she and Hajime vanished without a sound. Yue had well and truly mastered the use of Heavenstep now.

Kaori's wail of frustration echoed throughout the forest, and she immediately got to work on tracking Yue down. Though no one else joined in on the hunt, she seemed to be enjoying herself at least.

Still looking up at the sky, Atsushi muttered, "Goddamn, I'm so jealous."

"I know how you feel. I wish I could experience what it's like to have a harem," Noboru muttered.

"But you know, I kind of get why Nagumo got one," Akito added. Kentarou and Jugo nodded in agreement.

"I totally get you."

"When it comes to Nagumo, nothing's impossible."

"All the historians and bards have started calling Nagumo the Godslayer Demon Lord, so now everyone in Tortus thinks he's actually the new Demon Lord and is going to take over his castle," Kousuke explained, and the other boys just shook their heads.

"Haaah... Haaah, I want Yue-san to treat me like I'm trash. Just one disgusted look would be enough to make me happy," one of the other students muttered.

"Oh god, he's totally done for."

"Tell me about it. Doesn't he realize how rude he's being? Besides, if I were going to be stepped on, I'd rather be stepped on by Nagumo-sama."

"Oh no. Ai-chan-sensei, come back, our students are going off the deep end!"

Meanwhile, Nana confessed something rather surprising to the other girls.

"You know...I'm kind of jealous."

Yuka, who'd been glaring sourly at Hajime the whole time, turned back to Nana in shock.

"Wait, what?! Nana, don't tell me you're also..."

"That's not what she meant. I don't think Nana has a crush on Nagumo-san, she just wants a relationship like the one he has," Taeko explained, and Nana nodded in agreement.

Yuka breathed a sigh of relief, and after a moment's thought, she nodded.

"I see what you mean. It really is something special, Nagumo and Yue-san's relationship, I mean."

"Right? Though if Nagumocchi came on to me, I wouldn't say no."

"Yeah... Wait, what?! What are you saying, Nana?!"

"Yeah, but there's no way we could wedge ourselves into that harem."

"Not you too, Taeko?!"

Nana and Taeko just shrugged their shoulders, then turned back to where Hajime and Yue had been with a longing look in their eyes.

Meanwhile, Shea and the others seemed to have found some clues as to where Yue had gone, so they set off deeper into the forest.

Mao let out a small sigh as she watched them go.

"If anything, I'm amazed Kaori and the others managed to squeeze their way between Nagumo and Yue-san. Ai-chan-sensei and Lily have really gotten braver too."

"There are so many people in Nagumo-kun's harem now. It's like he's really become a Demon Lord," Ayako said with a nod, looking at some of the other girls.

"What do I have to do to become Nagumo-sama's pet?" one of them said.

"Maybe if I offered to be his live-in maid, I might have a chance."

"Yeah, that's not happening," Ayako said. "You two better get Ai-chan-sensei to cast spirit magic on you before you're lost for good."

In the same way that some of the boys had fallen for Yue—and Hajime—some of the girls had too. Their harsh life after coming to Tortus had made people pine for the kind of loving relationship Hajime and Yue had, but it had also messed with their ideas of a regular relationship.

Unsurprisingly, these students' friends were fervently praying that they would return to their senses before it was too late.

Ryutarou rubbed his temples tiredly as he watched his classmates discuss what the best way to become either Hajime's or Yue's pet would be. He then turned to Suzu, who was laughing dryly as she watched as well, and asked, "You're not gonna go looking for Nagumo?"

Suzu hadn't been expecting that question at all, so she looked quite taken aback.

"Nah, no way. What makes you think I would?"

"I mean, if not, that's fine. It's just...I dunno, you act more mature when you're around Nagumo, like you're a normal girl, so I just thought...maybe you'd wanna join Kaori and Shizuku now that there's a chance or something."

"Excuse me, does that mean you think I normally act like an immature brat? Nagumo-kun listened to my selfishness and gave me the chance to see Eri one last time, so I'm grateful to him, but that's all."

Suzu glared at Ryutarou, annoyed that he'd misread her.

"You know, Ryutarou-kun, I think we need to have a chat about your mental image of me."

"Okay, that was my bad. But I mean, half the time you act like a perverted old man, so it's not my fault. Hell, maybe you'd go after them just to peep."

"Okay, now you're just asking to get your teeth kicked in. Don't

underestimate my barrier burst, you bastard!”

Ryutarou scratched his cheek awkwardly while Suzu pulled out her fans, which she’d had Hajime remake for her. Kouki hurriedly stepped in before the two of them started fighting.

“C-Calm down, Suzu. Ryutarou wasn’t trying to insult you, he just —”

“You shut up, Kouki-kun. This muscle head seems to have forgotten the meaning of tact, so I’m going to have a nice long chat with him about how a proper gentleman is supposed to act!” Suzu growled menacingly, and Ryutarou finally decided he wasn’t going to take this anymore.

“Now look here! You, of all people, have no right to lecture me about tact. Who tried to sneak into Nagumo’s bedroom last night to peep on him? If there’s anyone who needs to be taught some manners it’s you, you wild child!”

“L-Look, I was curious! Can you blame me?! I just want to know what kind of crazy sex stuff onee-sama and the others get up to! It’d be a waste not to find out!”

“What do you mean a waste?! If anything, you should be thanking me for stopping you. If you’d actually gone, you wouldn’t have lived to see the morning!”

“Hmph, if you’re gonna be like that, I won’t invite you next time!”

“Thank fucking god! The last thing I want is a girl inviting me to peep on other people having sex!”

Suzu and Ryutarou had been arguing—after a fashion—more and more recently, so their classmates had gotten used to their antics. Everyone but Kouki could tell they had a thing for each other, but it was funny to see Kouki try to defuse the situation every single time due to his ignorance.

Though Kouki didn’t smile as freely as he used to, he’d still gone to hang out with Ryutarou and Suzu like usual when he’d returned to Verbergen. When he was with his best friends, he could forget his crushing guilt, even if only temporarily. And thanks to the conversation he’d had with his other classmates back at the fortress, he was more at ease than ever today.

Honestly, the other students were a bit relieved that he was starting to return to normal. The students had lost much, and much more in their lives had changed. The burdens they carried and the scars in their hearts would never disappear completely. But now they had a way home and they could laugh and joke with each other in peace. Their hearts were lighter than they’d ever been since coming to Tortus.

Moreover, it was precisely because they’d had to risk their lives to win this peaceful future that they understood not to take it for

granted. As a result, their heartfelt smiles were brighter than ever before, brighter even than the sun.

Meanwhile, Yue had teleported the two of them to the Sacred Tree Uralt at Hajime's request. He'd wanted a quiet spot away from the city, so this had been the perfect place.

Yue had returned to her younger form, and she let Hajime take her hand and lead her to the base of the tree as she wondered what he had planned.

It was a clear day, and since the forest's mist didn't reach this particular area, the sunlight was quite strong in the clearing. Now that the group had cleared the labyrinth, the tree had returned to its withered state, which meant there were no leaves to filter the sun's harsh rays.

"Yue, can you cast restoration magic for me?"

"Hm? Sure."

If Hajime wanted to enter the labyrinth, then all he needed to do was pull out the emblem that proved he'd cleared it.

Why bother asking me to use restoration magic on the tree? Maybe he just wants leaves for some shade? Or maybe he wants to enjoy the view together?

A little puzzled, Yue nevertheless cast restoration magic on the tree. In seconds, it turned lush and verdant.

No matter how many times Hajime saw it, it was still a marvelous sight. Broken up by the leaves, the rays of sunlight now looked like pillars reaching up to heaven. Hajime would likely never grow tired of staring at this breathtaking view.

Nodding in satisfaction, he took Yue's hand and sat down at the base of the tree's trunk. Yue sat down on his lap, and Hajime hugged her from behind. In her younger form, she fit there perfectly.

For a while, they basked in each other's warmth and admired the forest. The only sound present was the rustling of leaves any time a gust of wind passed by. Finally, Hajime leaned forward and whispered in Yue's ear, "Yue."

"Hm?"

"There's something I wanna show you."

"What is it?"

"Honestly, I should have shown it to you as soon as we got back, but it's something pretty important and I wanted to find the right timing. Sorry it took so long."

"Hm? I don't know what it is, but if you think it was best to wait, then I don't mind."

Yue tilted her neck to look up at Hajime, and he smiled. He leaned down to kiss her golden-blond hair, then pulled an artifact out of his

Treasure Trove. It was a small clear crystal the size of a pinball. The very same artifact he'd found in that room in the abyss where Yue had once been sealed.

He held one hand out in front of both of them, the artifact resting on his palm. It started to glow, and a second later, a hologram appeared before them.

As soon as that image resolved into a recognizable figure, Yue gasped. Her eyes widening, she muttered, "Uncle?"

Hajime said nothing, squeezing Yue tight with his one free arm. Reflexively, Yue gripped Hajime's free hand with both of her own.

Indeed, the person standing in front of both of them was Yue's uncle, Dienleed Galdea Vesperitio Avatarl.

"Aletia. It's been a long time, I imagine. You must hate me with every fiber of your being. No, I suspect hate isn't a strong enough word to express the depth of your feelings. What I did to you was—no, I'm sorry this isn't what I wanted to say. I gave it a lot of thought, but now that I'm finally recording my will, I'm not sure how best to express my feelings."

Smiling sadly to himself, Dienleed took a deep breath and closed his eyes to clear his thoughts. When he opened them again, he seemed much calmer.

"Yes, I suppose first off, I should express my thanks. Aletia, I imagine the person by your side now is someone you can trust wholeheartedly. At the very least, they must have acquired metamorphosis magic, be strong enough to challenge the depths of the true Great Orcus Labyrinth, and have the integrity to protect you from my guardian instead of fleeing alone."

Yue's hands were trembling, and Hajime could feel her confusion acutely. But he said nothing, and instead closed his eyes as if paying his respects to Dienleed.

"I ask you, the person who is by Aletia's side. Who are you? A man? A woman? What do you mean to Aletia? Are you her best friend? Her lover? Her new family? Or are you simply comrades on an adventure?"

There was a smile on Dienleed's face, and it was hard to believe he was a foolish, ambitious man who'd betrayed his queen for power. No, he looked like an uncle who wished the very best for his niece.

"I'm sorry I cannot express my gratitude in person, but nevertheless, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you so much for saving my beloved niece, and being a source of support for her."

Hajime couldn't tell what kind of expression Yue was making right now, but he didn't bother to open his eyes and check. This was a moment for the two of them, so he didn't want to butt in.

“Aletia. You must have so many questions. Or perhaps you’ve already discovered the truth. Do you know why I betrayed you and consigned you to a prison of unending darkness? Do you understand who you are, and who your true foe is?”

Dienleed went on to explain just in case, and his explanation more or less lined up with what Yue had already figured out. Namely, that Yue had been born with exceptional power, and so Ehitruje had decided to make her body the vessel for his soul. Dienleed had realized that and come up with a desperate plan to save his niece. He’d made it look like he’d become drunk with power and staged a coup against his niece and killed her, while actually sealing her away deep in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. Such a powerful seal had been the only way to ensure Ehit didn’t discover she was still alive, after all.

“When I discovered the truth, I spent a long time wavering over whether or not I should tell you. In the end, I decided the only way I would be able to execute a convincing deception was if you were ignorant. I also believed you’d cling to life much more strongly if you had hate to fuel you.”

Even if Dienleed had told Yue the truth, he wouldn’t have been able to stay in that sealed room for long, or Ehit might have started to suspect something. After making it seem like he’d killed her in the palace, he would have had to return to assume control of the vampire nation before people began to wonder where he’d gone.

It was obvious from how tightly Dienleed was clenching his fists that the decision had hurt him deeply.

“I won’t ask for your forgiveness. I just...I just want you to believe me. Maybe this truth is worthless to you now, but I still want you to know it.”

Dienleed smiled, tears welling up in his eyes. It was an expression filled with equal parts sadness and love.

“I love you, Aletia. From the bottom of my heart. Never once did I wish for your death. You’re like a daughter to me.”

“Uncle... Uncle Dien. I-I love you too!”

Yue was overcome with emotion. Now that she knew for sure that the suspicion she’d had upon defeating herself in the Frost Cavern was true, she couldn’t hold back her tears.

You were like a father to me too... Yue thought, sobbing freely.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you. I’m sorry I had to entrust your future and your safety to someone who may or may not even come. I’m a failure.”

“That’s not true!”

The hologram standing in front of them was nothing more than a vision from the past. Dienleed’s last will and testament. There was no way Yue’s words could reach him, but that didn’t stop her.

Though the tears continued to pool in Dienleed's eyes, he refused to let them spill. He tightened his gaze and continued speaking to his beloved daughter.

"I wanted to be by your side, to watch over you as you found happiness. It was my dream to give the man who might become your husband one good punch, then go out drinking with him and tell him he better make you happy or else. Though I'm sure any man you picked would do no less."

Dienleed looked off into the distance, imagining a future he knew he'd never get to see.

"I'm almost out of time. There's more I want to say, but...this is the best I can do with my shoddy creation magic skills," Dienleed said with a self-deprecating smile.

"No, don't go. Unc—no, father!"

Yue reached out toward Dienleed, tears streaming down her face. Her love for the man who'd been her uncle by blood, but her father in truth, was clear.

Hajime hugged her even tighter.

"I can't be by your side anymore. I no longer have that right. But for as long as I live, and even after I die, I shall keep praying for your happiness, Aletia, my beloved daughter. May your life be filled with warmth and kindness, and may the path you walk be blessed."

"Father..."

Dienleed looked a little to the side, presumably trying to look at whoever might be standing next to Yue.

"To you, who stands beside my beloved daughter. Please make her the happiest girl in the world. That's all I ask."

"I will. You have my word," Hajime replied quietly. There was no way his words could have reached Dienleed, but Dienleed looked satisfied nevertheless. He must have known how the person next to Yue would have answered, regardless of who they were. Dienleed had been one hell of a man, in multiple ways. It was no surprise Yue had turned out the way she had, considering who her role model had been.

The hologram started to fade, and it almost felt like Dienleed's soul was slowly ascending to heaven. Yue and Hajime huddled close together and listened to Dienleed's final words before he vanished completely.

"Goodbye, Aletia. May you find eternal happiness."

Yue's sobs echoed through the forest as he vanished. She was sad, of course, but it wasn't just sadness she was feeling in this moment. She turned around and buried her face in Hajime's chest. Hajime squeezed the hologram artifact in his fist and gently embraced Yue with both arms.

After what seemed like forever, Yue finally looked up at Hajime. He gently wiped the tears off her face and cupped her cheeks.

“Yue.”

“Mmm...”

Yue could see the determination and the warmth in Hajime’s eyes.

“I’m the happiest man in the world because you’re here in my arms.”

“Mmmm... And I’m the happiest girl in the world because I’m here in your arms.”

The two of them brought their faces closer to each other. They smiled, but before Yue could move in for a kiss, Hajime suddenly pulled a ring out of his pocket. It was a simple ring made of silver that had no special powers, save one. It was nigh indestructible.

Yue looked down at the sparkling silver ring, her eyes also sparkling.

“Are you proposing to me?” she asked in the same joking tone she had when Hajime had first gifted her the mana-storing accessory set in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. Back then, Hajime had played it off, but this time—

“Yes.”

“Ah...”

His gaze made it clear that he was dead serious. Yue blushed bright red, and for a moment, she found herself at a loss for words.

“In Japan, it’s customary to ask the bride’s father first before asking for her hand in marriage, which is why I wanted to wait until after you heard your father’s final words before proposing.”

“Mmm...”

Hajime couldn’t actually give his proposal to Dienleed though, so he gave it to Yue instead.

“Yue, I want you. Will you give everything, even your future, to me?”

“Ah...”

Yue pressed her forehead against Hajime’s chest. She was too overcome by emotion to speak. Her fingers trembled in happiness. There was, of course, only one answer she could give.

Once she’d calmed down a little, she looked up at Hajime and beamed, looking like a blooming rose. Then, in a firm voice that resonated through the forest, she said, “Yes!”

She held out her left hand, and Hajime slipped the finger onto her ring finger. He then brought out a second ring, which Yue took and put on Hajime’s ring finger.

The two of them showed their rings off to each other and beamed. This was quite possibly the happiest moment of both of their lives.

The leaves rustled again, a brief gust of wind blowing past. A few

of the leaves floated down, ripped from their branches by the breeze. It was almost as if the sacred tree itself was blessing their engagement.

Suddenly, the two of them heard lively voices in the distance. From the sounds of it, their comrades had finally found them.

Yue's smile suddenly turned devilish, and she poked Hajime's cheek.

"So, how many more rings did you make, Hajime?"

"Is this really the time to be bringing that up, Yue?"

"Mmm, you should pick Shea next."

"Can't we just enjoy this moment?" Hajime asked, saying basically the same thing Yue had a while ago at the plaza.

Yue grinned and replied in a confident voice, "Knowing you, I'm sure you'll be able to make everyone happy."

"You know, in the eyes of society, what I'm doing would just make me a no-good womanizer, right?"

"Who cares what society thinks? As long as we're happy, it's all good, isn't that right? If society has a problem with that, we can just destroy it."

"That's a pretty terrifying proclamation. Well, I decided to make all of you happy when I made these rings, so it's not like I have any second thoughts. You're all mine."

"Mmm... That's the Hajime I know and love. But—"

Yue's crimson eyes sparkled, and she locked her gaze with Hajime's.

"I'm the only one who's special, and I won't let anyone else take that away."

As she said that, she pressed her lips against Hajime's just as Shea and the others burst into the clearing. As always, they let out cries of dismay as they saw Hajime and Yue kissing, and the silent forest clearing soon became as noisy as the city center.

Yue's lips lingered on Hajime's for a few seconds longer, but then she pulled away and the two of them smiled at each other. They then stood shoulder to shoulder and spread their arms wide to welcome all of their comrades. This journey had started with just the two of them, but now they both had so many more people they loved and cared about. And they too were an essential part of the happy future Dienleed had wanted for Yue.

Epilogue

About a year had passed since an entire class of high school students had mysteriously vanished in the middle of the day. The thirty-two students sitting in that classroom, as well as their homeroom teacher, had simply disappeared without a trace. It had been a harrowing incident that no one had been able to find a cause or explanation for. The students couldn't have been kidnapped, since it had been the middle of the day, and no one else in school had noticed. Besides, a group that large would have stood out no matter how hard a potential criminal tried to keep things inconspicuous. No one had seen thirty-odd students and a teacher anywhere in the streets, and no one had even seen the moment of their disappearance.

At first, people had suspected the teacher herself of perhaps doing something to the students, hypnotizing them for example, and then getting them all to leave separately and gather elsewhere. However, no evidence had been found of any suspicious activity on her part by the various investigative agencies that had looked into the incident. Besides, everyone's lunches had been found left in the classroom half-eaten. Bits of half-finished homework students had been working on last minute, an only partly erased blackboard, and desks and chairs in the middle of being moved all pointed to one conclusion: the students had been going about their lives like normal up until the moment of their unexpected disappearance.

There were no traces of people being dragged out of the classrooms or moved against their will, so it really seemed as though they'd just vanished in the middle of lunchtime. The students in adjacent classrooms and those who had happened to be passing by at the time all testified that everything had been normal until those students suddenly weren't there. They also all had mentioned that a bright flash of light had enveloped the classroom and someone had shouted, "Everyone, get out!" seconds before they'd all disappeared. Unfortunately, the police had been unable to find any leads whatsoever. It was as if another Mary Celeste incident had occurred in the modern day. After some time, the students' inexplicable disappearance became the stuff of urban legends.

Naturally, the media showered the incident with constant attention as well. It became so famous that international news agencies started reporting on it as well, not just Japan. Journalists,

cult leaders, and researchers of the occult from all over the world gathered to either look for evidence of their own or offer their own esoteric theories about what had caused the disappearance. That, unfortunately, also led to an increase in the crime rate in that high school's city, and for a time the school had to close its doors for the students' safety. The parents and families of the students who'd disappeared were bombarded with constant media attention as journalists pestered them with questions.

Unsurprisingly, those families became exhausted both in body and mind as they had to deal with the unwanted attention.

Both for good and for ill though, the march of time was relentless, and after half a year or so, the public's attention moved on to other affairs. News stations stopped running stories about the incident, at best doing short update blurbs about how the investigation was progressing. Pundits and fans of the occult tried to milk as much content as they could to increase their own fame, but the general public went back to following the latest political events and celebrity scandals and so on instead. The criminals emboldened by the incident and the commotion it had caused were rounded up in short order, and the crime spree ended too.

In the residential district of the town with the mystery high school was a decent-sized house with a nameplate on the front entrance that read "Nagumo." In the living room of that house, a tall, lean man with short-cropped black hair said in a tired voice, "Sumire, shouldn't you head to bed? You were up late yesterday too."

He was none other than Shu Nagumo, Hajime's dad. He was sitting at the living room table, staring intently at his laptop's screen.

"I'll be fine. If anything, you're the one who needs to sleep," Hajime's mother, Sumire Nagumo said. She was sitting across the table and was likewise staring at her work rather than the person she was speaking to.

If Hajime could see what his parents looked like right now, he would have been quite surprised. Both of them tended to be quite energetic, cracking jokes all the time, but right now they resembled lifeless scarecrows.

Though Shu was combing the net for any news of the missing students and Sumire was busy making flyers with Hajime's face on them, they were working mechanically, as if their hearts weren't really in it.

"You've been doing your regular job on top of all of this, haven't you? You'll burn out at this rate."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. All the other guys at my company are helping pick up the slack. Hell, they chased me out the other day, saying I wouldn't be any help with how sickly I looked."

“It’s the same at my place. I’ve been on hiatus for so long that I feel bad about taking more breaks, but my editor and my assistants have all insisted I take as long as I need.”

The rest of the world might have moved on from the mass disappearance incident, but the families of the students certainly hadn’t. Not content to just wait for the police, they’d banded together and formed an association to share information and work on investigating the disappearance independently.

Naturally, the coworkers of those parents all understood the situation they were in. Shu was the manager of a small-scale video game company and Sumire was a popular shojo mangaka. Normally, if they’d taken as much time off as they had, their respective employers would have fired them, but their coworkers and bosses sympathized with the two of them and were doing all they could to accommodate them. Most of Shu and Sumire’s coworkers knew Hajime personally, since he’d often come in to help them both even as a kid, and they were worried about him as well.

At any rate, thanks to the kindness of those around them, Shu and Sumire hadn’t lost their jobs. The two of them were grateful for that, since they didn’t want Hajime to come back just to find his parents were both NEETs. However, as time had passed, those around Shu and Sumire had started to lose faith. At first they’d given the two of them words of encouragement, saying that they’d definitely find Hajime-kun before long, but now they’d written him off as dead and sympathized with his parents, who still desperately wished to believe he was alive. Of course, they couldn’t bring themselves to say they thought he wasn’t coming back, but in their hearts, they were hoping Shu and Sumire would move on, for their own sakes.

Shu and Sumire were both perceptive enough to notice the change, and it only made them feel more helpless. At the same time, it was only thanks to the pity their coworkers were showing them that they could continue searching for Hajime, so they couldn’t really say anything.

Some other families hadn’t been so lucky. Many parents had been forced to quit their jobs, or had collapsed from the stress of working while also looking for their kids. The Sonobe family, for example, had been hounded by so many reporters and gawkers that they’d been forced to temporarily close down their restaurant. The Hatayamas had it even worse, however, since at the start people had suspected Aiko of being the mastermind behind the disappearance. Many people willing to believe baseless accusations without evidence had started harassing them so badly that Aiko’s grandparents had a breakdown and needed to be hospitalized. But regardless of their situation, every parent was still desperately searching for their child even a year later.

Unfortunately, no one had been able to discover any clues. The reality that with every passing day the chances of finding their children grew slimmer continued to press down on everyone, draining their hope and energy.

Shu and Sumire were no exception. They still believed their son was alive out there somewhere and doing everything he could to make his way back home. They even cleaned his room every day so that it would be ready whenever he returned. But as time passed, despair started winning out over hope and their hearts began to waver. Whenever they cleaned his room, they could feel how cold it was without his presence, and it felt like they could hear echoes of his voice from the corners. They knew those voices were just hallucinations, but they couldn't help but turn around hopefully every time.

Every single time the doorbell rang, they rushed out in the hopes it was Hajime standing outside. But recently, the two of them had stopped talking to each other as much. Trying to force a conversation just led to empty back-and-forths like this one, so they'd started having them less and less. However, when silence fell, they could hear the ominous ticking of the clock, denoting the merciless passage of time.

Tired of reading heartless comments on the internet, Shu closed his laptop and let out a deep sigh. As always, he hadn't found any useful information. He rested his elbows on the table and covered his face with his hands.

"Hajime...where are you?"

"Dear..." Sumire said worriedly. Though both of them were in their early forties, they both looked wizened and old.

Sumire stopped her own work and looked up at her crying husband.

"Maybe you should sleep after all?"

"You know I can't, even if I wanted to."

"I guess not..." Sumire mumbled sadly. She understood her husband's feelings perfectly. No matter how physically exhausted they became, they couldn't shake the sense that time spent sleeping was time wasted.

As the days passed, their restlessness and frustration only mounted. They wouldn't be able to sleep soundly until their son was safely home.

"Don't worry. It's only been a year. Even if it takes decades, we'll find him. And we can't afford to collapse until then."

"Yeah, you're right."

Shu worked his stiff facial muscles into a facsimile of a smile, and Sumire responded with an awkward smile of her own. She got up and

circled over to Shu, hoping to comfort him even a little, but before she could hug him the doorbell rang.

Shu and Sumire exchanged glances, then turned to the clock in the living room. It was well past midnight.

"I'll get it. It's probably just another one of those vultures."

"Be careful."

Considering the time, it could only be a nosy journalist or a heckler of some sort. Even if there had been a serious breakthrough in the investigation, the police or any of Shu's contacts would have called him first before just ringing the doorbell. No decent person would be ringing their doorbell at this time of night. In the worst case, it might even be a burglar or some other criminal.

Recently, they'd stopped getting as many visits from curious onlookers and journalists, so Shu or Sumire should have guessed that there was another possibility, but they were so exhausted at this point that they'd stopped hoping it was their son every time they went to the door.

Shu slowly got to his feet and picked up the interphone receiver. Never in his wildest dreams did he expect to hear his son's voice on the other end.

"Umm...it's me..."

Shu looked over at the display and his jaw dropped. Hajime was standing in front of the door, timidly looking up at the camera. Those who'd only known him from Tortus would have been shocked at how unsure he looked.

Sumire, who was staring at the display as well, looked just as shocked as her husband. Of course, Hajime had grown, both physically and emotionally, during his time in Tortus. He had a different air about him now, he was a few centimeters taller, and his eyes had a dangerous gleam to them that hadn't existed before, but Shu and Sumire still recognized him instantly, especially since the way he raised his eyebrows slightly when he wasn't sure how to act hadn't changed one bit. Their beloved son, the one they'd fervently believed was still alive, had finally come home.

Shu dropped the receiver, then he and Sumire both rushed toward the door. They tumbled over each other as they crossed the narrow hallway and flung the entrance door open.

"U-Umm...I'm home, mom, dad."

It wasn't an illusion this time. A very real Hajime was standing there in front of the door, looking a little nervously at his parents.

"Hajime!" Shu and Sumire shouted in unison, almost bowling him over as they ran over and hugged him.

"Hajime, you dolt! Where have you been all this time?!"

"Ah, thank god... Thank god you're safe. Do you have any idea

how worried we were?"

They both squeezed him so tight he had trouble breathing. After all the hallucinations they'd seen, they had to know he was real. They had to know that he wouldn't just disappear again. And so, they hugged him as tightly as they could.

The dim streetlights, the bit of light leaking out of the house, and the pale moonlight all gently illuminated a family finally reunited.

For a long time, Hajime said nothing. He just stood there, his arms half-raised, his eyes wide. He knew his disappearance must have been causing his parents to worry. He'd also known they'd have faith he'd return. But he was a very different person from the one they'd known. Sure, he'd dyed his hair black and made his fake arm and eye look as natural as possible, but that didn't change what he was inside. He'd thought his parents would have been shocked at how he'd changed. In fact, he'd been expecting them to wonder if he really was Hajime or not. Depending on the situation, he'd even been planning on giving them some time to sort out their feelings if they weren't ready to take him back right away.

Now that the moment had come though, he realized he needn't have been worried. No matter how much he might have changed, Sumire and Shu would never mistake their own son. The fact that they hugged him without hesitation was proof of that. All of the fears and worries Hajime's clone had thrown at him back at the Frost Caverns had all been groundless after all.

Overcome by emotion, scenes of everything he'd seen and experienced in Tortus flashed in Hajime's mind. Once he was done reminiscing, he thought, *Ah, I'm finally home.*

With trembling arms, he wrapped his parents in a big hug. He needed to be careful not to crush his thin, frail parents with his monstrous strength, so his hug was as gentle as possible. In a voice that trembled as much as his arms, he said, "Dad, mom, I'm home."

He'd wanted to say those words for so long.

After a while, Shu and Sumire stepped back, tears in their eyes. They looked down at their son again, taking him in. Then, smiling, they said in equally shaky voices, "Welcome home, Hajime!"

Those words signaled the end of Hajime's long, painful journey.

Hajime had been teleported to another world along with his classmates, and despite being given one of the most run-of-the-mill jobs in existence, he'd grown strong enough to defeat god himself. He'd overcome all obstacles in his path, determined to make it back home no matter the cost. And now that he had, his story could finally come to a close.



Of course, the Nagumo family would have quite a busy time once they learned that Hajime had brought a vampire princess, a bunny girl, a masochist dragon, and a dagon mother and daughter back with him. The world would be in an uproar with the sudden return of the missing students as well, and numerous powerful organizations and world governments would take action once they learned about the existence of an entire other world.

Peaceful though they might be, Hajime and his comrades' days would still be filled with incidents and adventures of all kinds. But all of that was a story for another time.

One thing was certain though, which was that no matter what else came Hajime's way, he would overcome it without fail. No matter how powerful the threat, he would beat it down with even greater strength. If fate conspired against him, then he would tear down fate itself. Because as long as he had his precious comrades—and his beloved vampire princess—by his side, he was unstoppable.

Afterword

Spoiler alert!

There's one more epilogue after this afterword, which focuses on Miledi. It contains spoilers for the *Arifureta Zero* series, so if you're planning on reading that, I'd advise you to hold off on this epilogue for now. And for those of you with no interest in the *Arifureta Zero* series, please listen to this humble author's request and at least read the first chapter of the *Arifureta Zero* manga. It's free to read on the Comic Gardo website, even! That should give you enough context to understand what's going on at least, and maybe make the ending hit a little harder emotionally. So please, at least read the first chapter!

With that warning out of the way, I want to thank you for picking up *Arifureta*'s thirteenth and final volume.

It's been a long journey, but we finally made it to the end. The first volume was published seven years ago, and it feels like the years dragged on forever, but also flew by in a flash.

Arifureta got a manga adaptation, had a full spin-off prequel published, and even got an anime. It's very humbling to see how popular it's become. The web novel version of the story's been done for a while, and I've been updating the after stories whenever I feel like it, but now that the published version is finished, it feels like I've truly finished something monumental.

This is all thanks to the support of you readers. Thank you so very much for sticking with *Arifureta* until the end. You have my undying gratitude.

Now then, I imagine some fans are wondering if this is really the end of *Arifureta*. Well, I might have some good news for you. After all, I want to see the after stories published too! Plus, I'd love nothing more than to see Takaya-ki-sensei draw all of the new characters who show up. That being said, I can't promise anything on my end, but I'm doing my best to convince Overlap to make it happen!

On an unrelated note, did anyone watch the *Arifureta* OVA that came bundled with the special edition of this volume? I don't want to spoil it for anyone, so I won't say much about it except...that it was awesome. Seeing Hajime's party meet up with Liberators in animated form was really moving. Thank you so much to all of the anime staff who worked on it! For those of you who didn't get the special edition, I'm sure the OVA will be on streaming sites eventually, so please

watch it then!

Oh, and I have one more anime-related announcement. If you read the obi cover, you probably already know this, but the anime's going to be getting a season 3! There aren't too many novel series that get three full anime seasons. Honestly, I doubted my ears when I heard the news. This, too, is thanks to everyone's support.

As always, I'd like to finish off with the acknowledgments.

A big thank you to my illustrator, Takaya-ki-sensei; as well as the artist for the manga, RoGa-sensei; the artist for the everyday manga, Misaki Mori-sensei; and the artist for the *Arifureta Zero* manga, Kamichi-sensei. I'd also like to thank my editor, my proofreader, and everyone else involved in the publication process, as well as all of the staff who worked on the *Arifureta* anime! And last, but certainly not least, thank you dear readers. The seven years I spent with all of you were an irreplaceable part of my life. I'm truly grateful to have had this opportunity.

Actually, I guess it's been nine years for those of you who've been following me since I started writing on Narou. It's thanks to all of your support that I was able to get published and express my gratitude here in print.

Once again, thank you so much for sticking with me this long! I pray we'll meet again in a future afterword!

Ryo Shirakome

Extra Chapter: Another Epilogue

In a different world and a different time, there lived a girl in a small village near her nation's outer border. She was in her teens, had her black hair in a short bob cut, and had tanned skin. Judging by the plain, worn dress that she wore, she wasn't very wealthy. If she put more effort into taking care of her appearance, she could have been beautiful, but it was clear she didn't care.

Other girls in her village did whatever they could to dress up and make themselves look pretty, but she was perfectly content with her plain clothes. No one in the village looked down on her for dressing so plainly, though.

"Hey, Sheeni! You're looking awfully energetic today!"

"Of course I am! Who do you think you're talking to? I'm the prettiest girl in the world!"

"Ha ha ha, I see that that self-confidence of yours never wavers!"

"I'm just speaking the truth! A truly beautiful person is beautiful on the inside too, so I can't go around telling lies now, can I?"

"Good morning, Sheeni-onee-chan! I see you're as annoying as ever!"

"Good morning to you too! I'll get you back for that insult; just you wait!"

Sheeni put a smile on everyone's faces, regardless of who they were. She was an orphan who'd been dropped at the village orphanage's doorstep when she was a baby. But from the way she carried herself, it was clear she didn't find her situation depressing. She had a natural charm that drew people to her as well.

To top it all off, she was a great help to everyone. A few years ago, she'd opened her business "Jack-of-all-trades Sheeni-tan" and started going around doing odd jobs for all of the villagers. She was a hard worker and clever to boot, so they all trusted her. In fact, there was no one in the village who didn't know her.

It was still early in the morning, but Sheeni went around greeting everyone with a spring in her step and a smile on her face. Her job today would be helping out at the village's largest store. The owner had gotten an unexpected shipment of new goods and he'd asked Sheeni to help sort out the inventory.

This wasn't her first or even fifth time helping out at the store, so she and the other employees were good friends by now. When she

arrived at the store, they greeted her warmly and together they got to work unloading and unpacking crates. Once the work was done, the other employees settled down for lunch while Sheeni took her pay and started heading back to the orphanage.

“H-Hey, Sheeni. Why not eat with us before you go?” a boy around Sheeni’s age said, stopping her before she’d gone too far. He was actually the eldest son of the shop owner. Though he normally looked a bit rugged, right now he was blushing and fidgeting like a shy young boy.

The other employees watched on with interest, waiting to see what Sheeni’s response to the young master would be.

As the boy waited nervously, Sheeni turned around and said, “No thanks!”

The boy’s shoulders slumped at the immediate rejection, and the other employees sighed in exasperation.

“Wh-Why not?!”

“I promised the kids at the orphanage that I’d make lunch for them!”

With that, Sheeni turned on her heel and began walking home once more.

Normally, this was when the boy would begrudgingly back down, but not today. He chased after her and shouted, “W-Wait! Is it true you’re going to be leaving the village?!”

He’d heard the rumors from the other villagers that she’d been working all this time not just to support the orphanage, but also to save up travel expenses. It had been quite a shock, since he’d assumed that Sheeni would stay in this village her whole life. He was hoping that Sheeni would refute the rumors and say of course she wouldn’t go, but once again, she betrayed his expectations.

“Oh wow where’d you hear that? But yeah, it’s true, I’m going on a journey!”

In this country, people were considered adults once they turned fifteen. But while Sheeni was free to do as she pleased, it was rare for people to leave their home village. Most orphans didn’t even leave the orphanage until they found stable employment, and that was harder to do outside the village than in it.

“But...what for? Do you even have a destination in mind?”

“Nope!”

“Why do you sound so happy about not having a plan?!”

“I’m just at that age where I want to go out and see the world! Gotta travel freely, you know?”

“Excuse me?!”

The boy couldn’t understand Sheeni at all, but that was nothing new. He was the one who’d fallen for this weirdo, so he couldn’t really

complain.

“A girl like you shouldn’t be traveling alone. You should just stay here. Besides, I already talked to my dad about it and...he’d be fine with you sticking around and helping me! Forever!”

As far as confessions went it was an awkward one, but the boy had still worked up his courage to say that. Not only were the employees all watching with bated breath, but the son’s parents were watching from the doorway as well now.

Sheeni wasn’t so dense that she couldn’t tell what the boy was proposing. And when someone was being serious, it was in her nature to respond seriously as well.

“I’m sorry,” she replied simply with no hint of teasing or deflecting.

Everyone gasped, surprised at how solemn she’d become.

“But ever since I can remember, I’ve had this suffocating feeling that something isn’t right. Every night I see these dreams, but when I wake up I forget them and all I’m left with is this horrible feeling that something is missing.”

“Wh-What are you saying?”

The boy could see the unbending will reflected in Sheeni’s brown eyes. It was hard to believe a girl of only fourteen could look so determined.

Everyone watching felt as though they were looking at someone whose very existence transcended their own. They knew they wouldn’t be able to stop her. After all, when Sheeni set her mind on something, no one could sway her.

“I want to know what it is I’m missing, and so desperately trying to find again.”

Sheeni knew she wouldn’t find it if she stayed here in the village. Even if she didn’t know where it was she had to go, she had to get moving.

She smiled gently at the boy, and that tender expression tugged at his heartstrings.

“That’s why I have to go. I’m sorry, but I can’t return your feelings.”

It was a gentle, but firm refusal to his proposal. And so, when she once again turned around to walk away, no one called out to stop her.

Sheeni avoided the main streets on her way back to the orphanage, sticking to the back alleys. She wasn’t confident she’d be able to respond to any villagers who greeted her with a smile. It felt as though her head was filled with fog, as if a haze had been cast over her memories. She knew something extremely important was hidden beyond that haze, but no matter what she did, she couldn’t see

through it.

That feeling had been with her for as long as she could remember. When she was younger, it had even made her cry on numerous occasions. Even though the couple who ran the orphanage and all of the other kids living there were kind to her and loved her, she felt inexplicably lonely.

I feel like I'm forgetting something important...but I can't think of what it might be.

Sheeni hadn't ever suffered from amnesia, and yet she kept thinking memories were missing. The ever-present haze was suffocating and isolating...and she had only one hint to guide her.

Just who...are those people?

Though she could never remember the dreams she had, she did vaguely recall seeing the same six silhouettes in them. Her recollections were vague enough that she couldn't recall their appearances or their clothes or any other notable features, but she felt like all six of them were saying different things to her, though she could never remember what. All she knew was that whenever she thought about them she was overcome by a burning desire to meet them.

One of them, she especially felt like she *had* to see.

That one... Why does he look so sad?

Whenever she thought about that particular silhouette, she was overcome by an overwhelming urge to cry and a boundless sense of sadness. Whatever feelings she harbored for that one were different from how she felt for the other five.

Sheeni clutched her chest and stopped in her tracks, looking down at the floor. But just then, someone called out to her.

“Oh, there she is! Shee-onee-san!”

Sheeni looked up and saw a younger girl standing a bit farther down the road. She was one of the girls from the orphanage.

“H-Hey, what's wrong? Why are you in such a rush?” Sheeni asked as she managed to make a cheerful smile and put the thoughts of the mystery figure in the back of her mind for now. However, the young girl didn't seem to notice Sheeni's inner struggle and dashed over to grab Sheeni's arm.

“Hey, wait, what's going on?!” Sheeni asked as the girl started dragging her back to the orphanage.

“Come quick! There's a noble at the orphanage!”

“A-A noble?! Why is he visiting us? We don't receive any money from nobles, and we're doing fine without their help, aren't we?”

The couple that ran the orphanage funded it with the profits from their other business, and the children who grew up and left it often sent back money as well. There was no reason for a noble to come and

offer financial support.

"I don't know! He's not even from this country..."

"A foreign noble? Then it makes even less sense that he'd visit our orphanage."

"I don't know what's going on either, but mom said to go get you, Shee-onee-san!"

"Huh, why me? Wait, has he been stricken by my overwhelming charm and come to propose to me? I'm sorry he came all this way, but I need to travel the world and—" Sheeni started rambling as usual, but for once the young girl didn't retort back with a cutting remark.

"That might actually be the case..." she muttered instead.

"H-Huh? Umm, I was just kidding, though," Sheeni replied, confused.

"I mean, it's possible? The noble's just a little older than you. Maybe he was in the middle of his travels and when he stopped in the village, he saw you and fell in love at first sight!"

"Well, we can't have that. I'm going to meet my prince charming during my travels, I'm sure of—"

Sheeni once again thought of that mysterious figure who kept showing up in her dreams. As she blushed a little, the young girl gave her a pointed stare and said, "Shee-onee-san, you're practically an adult. Only little kids dream about meeting their prince charming, you know?"

"Please don't give me that look. You're going to make me cry."

The young girl's pitying glance caused Sheeni a lot of psychological damage.

"Anyway, he seemed like a nice person, but you never know what could happen when you make a nobleman mad, so let's hurry!"

"Fiiiiiiiine."

Sheeni let out a sigh, not really wanting to meet this nobleman.

I just hope he isn't too pushy or anything...

Fortunately, Sheeni's fears proved to be groundless.

As they approached the orphanage, Sheeni saw a sturdy two-horse carriage waiting at the entrance. No ostentatious decorations were adorning the outside, and it looked to be built for function over form. Honestly, it was hard to imagine a nobleman riding such a plain-looking carriage. Either this particular nobleman was a very practical person or he was traveling incognito.

"Shee-onee-san, make sure you mind your manners! If you annoy the nobleman, I'm going to put laxatives in your dinner!"

"That's a terrifying threat! Please don't!"

Man, she really doesn't trust me at all. Even I'm not dumb enough to aggravate a noble... Sheeni thought with a sad shrug of her shoulders.

As she entered the building, she could hear cheerful voices coming

from the living room. They belonged to the orphanage owner, whom Sheeni and the other orphans all called mom, as well as the other kids. It seemed this nobleman was getting along quite nicely with them.

Sheeni patted down her dress a little, relieved that this man was seemingly friendly, and opened the door to the living room.

"I'm home!" she said in an energetic voice.

"Welcome back. I take it you're Sheeni-san?"

As her eyes locked with the young man who was sitting at the living room table, a jolt of electricity ran down her spine. She stiffened up reflexively, her mind going blank.

"Come now, greet the gentleman," Sheeni's mom said.

"Are you okay?" her younger siblings asked.

However, she didn't hear either of them.

"My name is Weiss, and I am a member of the Cleyer noble family from the neighboring nation."

The man got to his feet and walked toward Sheeni. She couldn't take her eyes off him. He resembled the man in her dreams so much.

She realized now the man in her dreams had always been dressed in all black, with black hair, but the only thing black about this man's appearance was his pants. He had blond hair and blue eyes, and even his voice was different. Still, the kindness in his tone struck a chord deep within her.

"But in truth, I have another name. My oldest friends call me..."

This man, and the man from her dreams, was none other than—

"Oscar Orcus," the two of them said in unison.

The name came naturally to Sheeni, for some reason.

In that moment, memories came flooding in. As memories of a life she'd never lived filled her mind, Sheeni started to cry.

"I-I...my name is..."

The fog lifted, and the past life she'd forgotten rushed back all at once. She remembered the battles she fought with her comrades, the people important to her she lost, the almost endless time she spent in the darkness of her own labyrinth, the moment when her dearest wish was finally granted, and most importantly, the vow the man in front of her had made the day they'd parted.

"Miledi Reisen."

Once again, the both of them spoke in unison. The young man who'd been her first and dearest partner bowed before the girl who'd once fought against the world and fate itself. With a gentle hand, he wiped away the tears spilling down Miledi's cheeks.

"I told you, Miledi. I told you that even if an eternity passes, even if we're both reduced to nothing but souls, I would find you. That this time, I'd be the one to come for you."

"Yes...you did."

Miledi had no way of knowing how this miracle could have possibly occurred, but there was one thing she was sure of. The man smiling gently at her was the very same man she'd fallen in love with an eon ago.

"I've finally found you."

As he'd promised, he'd crossed the boundary of life and death, of worlds, just to find her.

Miledi couldn't hold herself back any longer, and now, there was no reason to.

"O-kun!"

She leaped into his arms, letting free the feelings she'd locked up on the day she'd decided to wait as long as it took for someone strong enough to inherit all seven ancient magic types and defeat god.

Oscar, too, was overcome by emotion as he wrapped his arms around Miledi. They hugged each other tightly, determined to never let go again.

The other children in the orphanage started cheering, while the villagers watching through the windows from outside started dashing off to tell everyone the hot gossip, but Oscar and Miledi didn't even notice. They had eyes only for each other.

"After all this time, I can finally say it," Oscar said softly.

The two of them broke apart but kept their faces close enough that their noses were still touching. Despite the eternity that had passed, his feelings hadn't faded in the slightest.

"_____"

No one else could hear his whispered confession. It was for Miledi's ears and Miledi's ears alone.

Blushing, Miledi smiled and looked up at Oscar with sparkling eyes.

"You know, O-kun..."

She brought her lips next to Oscar's ear and whispered her response.

"_____"

The two of them then looked into each other's eyes while the people around them fell silent.

The sight of Oscar and Miledi pressing their foreheads together was so precious that no one could bring themselves to interrupt the moment. The two of them just looked so happy.

In a different world and a different age, Miledi and Oscar once again set off on a journey. Like before, it started with just the two of them going around to help people in need as they searched for their remaining comrades. They were able to live their lives freely, unbound by any sense of duty.

They continued their endless journey, their hearts full of utter bliss.

Dramatis Personae

The Protagonists

Hajime Nagumo

Job: Synergist. Is known in the history of Tortus as the Demon Lord who felled god. The reason he's called a Demon Lord despite being a human is because of how terrifying he looked when he invaded the actual Demon Lord's castle with his harem. His classmates started calling him that, and the Haulia Clan spread the nickname far and wide until it became a well-known moniker in Tortus. In common people's minds, the Demon Lord was someone who opposed god, so the title makes a lot of sense.

After returning home, Hajime used numerous artifacts to deal with the mass media and obtain doctored birth certificates and citizenship papers for Yue and the others. He also started a business selling healing artifacts to make enough money to support his rather large family.

Of course, all this was done in the name of protecting his peaceful (?) life.

Yue

Job: Divine Priestess. After Ragnarok, she gained the ability to freely change her appearance, making her even more alluring than ever. Her extreme charm bewitches people into doing crazy things, and in many ways, she's a walking natural disaster. A fitting partner for the Demon Lord indeed.

After moving to Japan, she started attending the same school as Hajime. She causes trouble at school daily, but seems blissfully unaware of the fact that she's the source of it.

Hajime has to constantly mess with people's perceptions to ensure her antics don't attract the wrong kind of attention.

Shea Haulia

Job: Diviner. People often mistakenly think her job is martial artist or something similar because of how physically strong she is. Everyone agrees when it comes to brute force, she's the strongest in the world—stronger even than Hajime.

After moving to Japan, she started attending the same school as Yue and Hajime. Unlike Yue, her beauty isn't so otherworldly that people hesitate to approach her. In fact, she's so friendly that she's received numerous confessions of love. Sometimes the boys get exceptionally pushy and she tells them to talk to the hand—in a rather literal sense. Unfortunately, she doesn't realize the magnitude of her own strength, and she's remarked multiple times about how fragile humans from Earth are.

Hajime has had to use revival artifacts numerous times to keep Shea from being convicted of murder.

Tio Klarus

Job: Guardian. Contrary to popular belief, Tio's job isn't actually pervert. Much to the dismay of her clan, she has no sense of public modesty, putting her fetishes on full display at all times. That being said, at her core she's an intelligent and honorable (albeit still, extremely horny) woman. In her ultimate form, she's powerful enough to alter even the weather and is undoubtedly the strongest dragonman history's ever seen.

After moving to Japan, she started looking for a way to assimilate into working society together with Remia. Right now, she's debating whether to join Hajime's company or start one of her own.

To Hajime's surprise, she's been much less of a handful than the other girls, outside of constantly asking to be stepped on, anyway.

Kaori Shirasaki

Job: Priest. In Tortus she's known as the Black-Winged Saint and is as popular as the Fertility Goddess and the Goddess's Sworn Blade. In other words, she's more well-known than Yue, Shea, or Tio.

She's Yue's eternal rival, and even after returning to Japan the two of them are constantly at each other's throats.

Moreover, she's more skilled with spirit and restoration magic than even Yue, so her sense of what's fatal and what isn't has gotten rather skewed. She's destroyed things beyond all recognition before and still thought it was fine, since she could just revive or restore whomever or whatever she's mangled.

Myu

A young girl with unparalleled social skills. She's managed to make friends with the golems Hajime made, the seaman, and even the devourer.

After moving to Japan, she was enrolled in a kindergarten and is about to become an elementary school student. All of the kids in her class are her friends now, and a few months after Hajime taught her

how to use the internet, she's already made friends across the globe.

Remia

When she told the people of Erisen that she would be moving, the men of the village despaired.

After she moved to Japan, Hajime's neighbors were initially wary of the beautiful foreigner and her daughter, but she quickly won them over and now they all have trusting relationships. Among the Tortus natives who moved to Japan, she's the one most liked by the locals.

Shizuku Yaegashi

Job: Swordsman. After acquiring the power of selective slicing, Shizuku has gotten a lot more assertive about her wants and needs. Instead of mincing words, she's now willing to cut through anything that bothers her.

Unfortunately, after returning home and learning a terrible secret about the Yaegashi family, she ended up having to fight on once more.

Aiko Hatayama

Job: Farmer. She's known in Tortus as the Goddess of Fertility and Victory. A new sect of the church that worships her and her alone has been formed and grows in followers daily.

After returning to Japan, she resumed her teaching duties, but also used her magic to help out her family's orchard, and now the fruits they produce have become world-famous.

Unfortunately, the Hatayama family has no way of explaining to reporters and journalists what the secret of their success is, so even though they're making killer profits, their troubles have also multiplied.

The Students

Kouki Amanogawa

Job: Hero. He returned the Holy Sword and his Sacred Armor to Heiligh after Ragnarok, but the sword flew back to his side almost immediately, so he's still carrying it around, even back in Japan.

Chances are, he'll be summoned to another world again sometime. Whether or not he'll be able to become a true hero in the next world he visits is to be determined.

Ryutarou Sakagam

Job: Monk. He's a muscle head, but at the same time, he holds fast to his convictions no matter what. After returning to Japan, he's been spending a lot of quality time with Suzu.

Suzu Taniguchi

Job: Barrier Master. She might have been the character who grew the most over the course of the story. However, her perverted side hasn't changed one bit. After returning to Japan, she's been spending a lot of alone time with Ryutarou.

Yuka Sonobe

Job: Acrobat. A classic tsundere. She invited Hajime to eat at her family's restaurant after they returned to Japan, but she's still hiding her true feelings from him. Kaori seems to have noticed though and is keeping a close eye on her.

Nana Miyazaki

Job: Ice Mage. She's a very cheerful person with a strong heart, and after returning to Japan she's become quite popular. However, her ideal relationship is something akin to the one Hajime and Yue have, so any prospective suitor has their work cut out for them.

Taeko Sugawara

Job: Whip Master. A natural sadist who admires the relationship between Hajime and Tio. She's going to be admiring for a while, since she'll have a hard time finding a partner.

Atsushi Tamai

Job: Arabian Kirito. He often visits Yuka's family's restaurant with Noboru and Akito. Honestly, Yuka wishes they'd go somewhere else, but since Nana and Taeko come with them, she can't really send them away. Atsushi always teases Yuka about her relationship with Hajime. Yuka frequently counters with airborne pots and pans.

Noboru Aikawa

Job: Axe Warrior. He's been talking with Atsushi and Akito about going back to Tortus and becoming an adventurer instead of staying in Japan.

Akito Nimura

Job: Illusionist. A bespectacled boy who's good friends with Atsushi and Noboru. He's interested in adventuring, but he could also use his Illusionist skills to become a world-class magician on Earth: equally tempting options.

Jugo Nagayama

Job: Heavy Fighter. After returning to Japan, he gave up on judo,

since he knew he'd win easily with the ridiculous strength he obtained during his time in Tortus. His new career goal is to become a policeman.

Kentarou Nomura

Job: Geomancer. A literal coward. A full year has passed since everyone returned to Japan, but he *still* hasn't confessed his feelings to Ayako. The two of them still seem to be enjoying their time together, so his friends have given up on trying to make anything happen.

Kousuke Endou

Job: Assassin. The other students all agree that he's the strongest human alive, since no one considers Hajime human anymore.

After returning to Japan, he ended up fighting numerous secret organizations and saved the world multiple times. With every success, he became more and more chuuni, and became better friends with Hajime throughout. At this point, he really is the Demon Lord's right-hand man.

Ayako Tsuji

Job: Healer. Shy by nature, she hasn't moved her relationship with Kentarou forward even after returning to Japan. In truth, though, she actually likes this vague "more than friends but not quite lovers" zone they're in.

Mao Yoshino

Job: Rejuvenist. She hasn't changed at all since returning to Japan. All she wants is to live a carefree life, so she's learned from Hajime's example and is thinking of starting a business where she uses her magic to help people and also make easy money.

Shinji Nakano

Job: Pyromancer. Still terminally single, and still looking for a girlfriend. It's gotten so bad, he's even asked to become Hajime's disciple. Unfortunately, every single time he tries to woo a girl, it does not end well.

Yoshiki Saitou

Job: Wind Mage. The only person capable of stopping his friend Shinji from going overboard in his attempts to get a girlfriend. He wants a girlfriend too, but after returning to Japan, he's been so busy stopping his friend's antics that he hasn't had time to hit on girls.

Eri Nakamura

Job: Necromancer. Deceased.

After returning to Japan, Suzu went to see Eri's mother, but found that she'd already moved. With Hajime's help, she looked into what had been going on in the Nakamura household, after which she got so pissed at Eri's mom that she didn't even bother to find her and let her know her daughter had died. Instead, Suzu asked her own parents to let her build a grave for Eri in their family plot, which she visits every year on Eri's birthday. She also goes to visit whenever something important happens in her life to fill her best friend in on the details.

Daisuke Hiyama

Job: Warrior. Deceased. Hajime personally went to Hiyama's family to let them know what had become of their son. Aiko went with him, and only those who were present at that meeting know what happened during it.

Reichi Kondou

Job: Spear Fighter. Deceased. Hajime and Aiko did the same for his family.

Yukitoshi Shimizu

Job: Dark Mage. Deceased. Hajime and Aiko did the same for his family.

The Nine Nominally Important Classmates

Yuya Suzuki

Job: Sniper. He's a member of the archery club with sharp eyes, which are his most distinctive feature. He had a change of heart after Ragnarok and decided to dedicate his life to helping others. After graduating high school, he joined the SDF and accomplished numerous great deeds. His two friends, Nao Arakawa and Shouta Mori, are pretty weird, so he feels like he has to be the responsible one.

Nao Arakawa

Job: Shielder. He's a member of the baseball club and is nearly as well-built as Jugo and Ryutarou. As a result of what happened in Tortus, he's now a masochist who wants women to step on him. There's no going back for him now.

Shouta Mori

Job: Demolitionist. He has a scary face, but is a pretty nice person. He admires Hajime greatly and wants to be stepped on by him. From

Hajime's perspective, it's a bit sus, but nevertheless, Shouta's dream is to be a disposable pawn for the great Nagumo family. There's no going back for him now.

Mei Fujimoto

Job: Spellsword. A petite girl with pigtails. She picks up most skills easily, but has a hard time dedicating herself to any one thing. Admires Yuka greatly. After learning that Hajime had started a company, she's hoping to eventually work as his secretary.

Sakura Aizawa

Job: Sealer. She has long hair, which she usually ties with a scrunchie. At a glance, she looks like a gentle and demure girl, which fits as she comes from a well-off family. She respects Yuka from the bottom of her heart and is wondering if she can use her family connections to help Hajime's parents get ahead in their careers. After all, she figures if she can get the approval of Hajime's parents, it'll be easy to worm her way into his harem.

Rika Miura

Job: Mace Fighter. She wears her hair in a short ponytail and is a proficient naginata practitioner. She's a member of the secret society Soul Sisters, the secret Shizuku stan sect.

Kana Yokoyama

Job: Monk. She has very short hair, and her main hobby is spending time at the boxing gym. Though she sounds quite manly, she's a maiden deep down. She wishes she could be more like Yuka and even has a crush on her. But of course, she lacks the courage to confess. She's been friends with Shiori Mizushima and Kotone Hoshino since middle school and is getting fed up with dealing with their antics now that their personalities have changed.

Shiori Mizushima

Job: Water Mage. She has long bangs that cover her eyes and wants to become the Nagumo family's pet. In fact, she's already bought a collar for herself.

Kotone Hoshino

Job: Lightning Mage. A tall girl who usually keeps her hair in a bun. She wants to be the Nagumo family's live-in maid, and hopefully go from there to being their pet.

Heiligh Kingdom

Liliana S. B. Heiligh

Job: Barrier Master. She's now officially engaged to the Demon Lord who felled god, AKA Hajime. She couldn't go to Japan with everyone else because she still had responsibilities left in Heiligh, so she saw Hajime and the others off with tears in her eyes. Eventually, though, she made it to Japan like everyone else. She's still adjusting to the new society she finds herself in, but her natural talent and dauntless spirit will lead her to great places.

Helina Ashe

She's a member of the noble Ashe family that has served the Heiligh family for generations. She's Liliana's maid and bodyguard. Her skills are so great that even Hajime acknowledges her ability, and he often asks her to do things on his behalf. Liliana is as of yet unaware of that fact, however.

Kuzeli Reir

The new knight commander of Heiligh. For all her talents, Liliana still hasn't learned to give her subordinates time off, and Kuzeli has been run ragged by having to go all over the capital and aid in its restoration.

Female Knights

Many members of the secret society Soul Sisters survived Ragnarok, and their stunts supplement Kuzeli's suffering so.

Lundel S. B. Heiligh

The heir to Heiligh's throne. He had a crush on Kaori, so he cried for three days straight when he learned she was marrying Hajime. In the month after Ragnarok, he spent a lot of time with Myu and ended up falling for her next. Romance doesn't come easy for the heir.

Hoelscher Empire

Gahard D Hoelscher

Ever since Verbergen's embassy was built in Hoelscher's capital, he's been constantly tormented by the Haulia. He's desperately searching for a successor so he can leave the accursed capital behind and go out adventuring.

Ankaji Dukedom

Lanzwi Feuward Zengen

After Ragnarok, he's been plagued by numerous worries while his

son tries to expand his personal unit that's devoted to Kaori.

Bize Feuward Zengen

Captain of the "I Love Kaori-sama" squad. After the war, the squad was formally renamed "Knights of the Saint." They aren't actually knights though, since they're mostly just Kaori fans.

Verbergen

Ulfric Heipyst

The elders now spend most of their time arguing about whether Kaori, Aiko, Yue, Shea, or Shizuku is the best, and don't do much actual work. On top of that, the Haulia are always causing problems and his granddaughter is as hopeless as always, so Ulfric is constantly sighing.

After Ragnarok he's had to handle both domestic affairs and diplomacy by himself, so he's starting to get worn down by the constant overwork.

Altena Heipyst

After Shea went to Earth, she switched targets to Cam and tried to become his second wife. Whether or not Shea ends up with a mother-in-law younger than her depends entirely on Cam's integrity.

The Haulia

Cam Haulia

Or, as he likes to call himself, Cambantis Elfalight Rodelia Haulia, hunter of the unknowable, etc., etc.

Lana Haulia

For some reason, she can easily spot Kousuke at any time, even though all the apostles had trouble finding him. Not even the other Haulia are that good at locating him, so it's a truly mysterious skill. She's always bragging about how she's dating Hajime's right-hand man.

Par Haulia

Nea's partner. He's determined to become Hajime's best hit man and is continuing to polish his skills even after Ragnarok. Despite his youth, he's one of the most stoic rabbitmen. His sharpshooting skills are unreal, which makes perfect sense because his job is Sniper.

Nea Haulia

Par's partner. She wants to be Hajime's wife and is continuing to polish her skills even after Ragnarok. Despite her youth, she's one of the most stoic rabbitmen. Her close combat skills are unreal, which seems odd because her job is Artist. What art has to do with fighting, only a certain half-dragonman, half-demon from millennia ago would know.

The Dragonmen

Adul Klarus

He spends most of his time fainting while still standing every time he hears what ridiculous thing his granddaughter has done. His fire magic is the strongest among the dragonmen, and after Ragnarok, he's been spending his time flying between the various nations and trying to get them to work together.

Venri

Tio's foster mother. Like Adul, she's one of the oldest dragonmen alive. It seems she's been giving advice to Yue, whom she treats like a rebellious daughter. For her part, Yue doesn't really know how to react, but it seems she enjoys having a mother figure again.

Ristas

He had no choice but to accept Hajime's ability now that he defeated Ehit, but he still believes the elegant Princess Tio he once knew will return someday. Sadly, reality is not so kind.

The Adventurers

Crystabel

They're still running their clothing store in Brooke. Because Yue crushed so many men's balls during her travels in Tortus, there's now an entire association of extremely buff people who act effeminate, and Crystabel is serving as the association's first president.

Mariabel

They've opened up a branch shop in Heiligh's capital, and have the dubious honor of being the first person to ever have their balls crushed by Yue.

Arabel

They're currently training under Mariabel and hope to become the next manager of the branch shop in Hoelscher's capital.

The Clergy

Simon L. G. Levellair

The new pope. The L. G. in his name stands for Liv Gruen. Now that the truth of the Liberators has become known, he's started looking into Naiz's genealogy while spreading the new gospel.

David Zahler

The Templar Knight who started the sect of the church that worships Aiko. Simon's posted him at the Demon Capital in the hopes that it'll help him cool his head, but he's determined to continue recruiting Aiko worshippers the moment he returns to Heiligh. He's extremely close with the other Templar Knights who'd also served as Aiko's bodyguards.

The Demon Empire

Freid Bagwa

Deceased. Was defeated alongside his partner Uranos by Tio. At the very end, he finally returned to his senses and used the last of his power to teleport the demons in the Sanctuary back to Tortus.

If there's a world out there where humans and dragons live together in harmony, he might have been reincarnated into it. If so, he's surely reunited with his partner just as Tio had hoped he would, and is flying freely through the skies even now, or perhaps building a true utopia like he'd originally wanted to for his people.

The Liberators

Miledi Reisen

The Leader of the Liberators and a master of gravity magic. The color of her mana is sky-blue, and though she's the most annoying person in the world, she's undeniably strong. In her prime, she was strong enough to slaughter scores of apostles single-handedly.

Moreover, she actually inherited her annoying personality from a certain someone...

Oscar Orcus

Miledi's partner and a master of creation magic. The color of his mana is sunlight-yellow. He loves glasses in all their forms and despises muffler fans. He is, in fact, the one who invented Status Plates.

Naiz Gruen

A master of spatial magic. The color of his mana is earth-brown.

He was always the calm pillar of support for his wild comrades. Though, for some reason, he had a penchant for making young girls fall in love with him.

Meiru Melusine

A master of restoration magic. The color of her mana is sunset-orange. A sadistic pirate queen who loved her little sister more than life itself. She's half-dragon, half-vampire, and puts on an older sister act at all times, even to people older than her.

Laus Barn

A master of spirit magic. The color of his mana is night-black. He hates it when anyone brings up his lack of hair. He had a son named Sharm Barn and a loyal knight named Reinheit Ashe.

Vandre Schnee

A master of metamorphosis magic. The color of his mana is moonlight-silver. A half-demon, half-dragonman master of all martial arts. His Job was Artist. He loves mufflers in all their forms and despises glasses fans.

Lyutillis Haltina

A master of evolution magic. The color of her mana is forest-green. She was a beautiful elven woman, but unfortunately, also a pervert who wanted to be Meiru's chair. Additionally, her very first friend was a cockroach.

Bonus Short Stories

Shea-chan's Overwhelming Victory!

[This short story contains spoilers, so please read it after finishing the main series!]

A few days had passed since Ragnarok, and Hajime and Yue were flirting with each other like usual in their room in Verbergen.

"He he, what do you think?" Yue asked in a bewitching voice.

"P-Pretty good."

Yue wasn't in her usual form today and instead looked like a seventeen-year-old girl. She was giving off a different kind of charm than she usually did, which had Hajime transfixed.

"If you went to school, no one would be able to pay attention to their lessons."

"He he he..."

Yue blushed at the praise, but then she suddenly thought of something and grinned impishly as she turned her back to Hajime.

"Hajime, don't look this way until I say it's okay."

"Huh? Sure, I guess..."

Normally, Yue didn't care if Hajime watched her change, so he was a bit surprised by the request, but he still complied and turned around.

"Mmm, okay. I'm ready. You can turn around now, Hajime."

Hajime turned around...and his jaw dropped open.

"Well? Do I look good in a ponytail?"

Yue had put her hair up in a ponytail and was wearing pants, much like Shizuku's regular look.

"Holy shit, I've never seen anything so cute!"

It seemed the look was a huge hit with Hajime. Just then, there was a knock on the door.

"Hajime? Can I come in? There's something I want to ask—" Shizuku pushed the door open and trailed off as she saw Hajime salivating over Yue, who was currently stealing her look.

"Oh..." Hajime muttered as he turned to Shizuku.

"If you like ponytails that much, then..."

"Sh-Shizuku?"

"You can just ask me, you know?! I'm ready any time! Hajime, you idiooooooot!"

Shizuku ran out of the room in tears, passing by Kaori, who

shouted, “Wait, Shizuku-chan?! What’s wrong?! Wait up, Shizuku-chaaaaaan!” and chased after her.

“Mmm, well, that was an unfortunate accident,” Yue said, clearing her throat and transforming again as if nothing had happened.

“How about this, Hajime?” she said, now looking like an innocent five-year-old girl.

“Unbelievable! Okay, now this is definitely the cutest thing in the world! I’m losing my mind!” Hajime exclaimed. He’d clearly already gone nuts.

Yue cupped her now-puffy cheeks and blushed as Hajime praised her. Unfortunately, the real Myu chose that exact moment to show up.

“D-Daddy?”

Hajime twitched, then slowly turned to look at the doorway. Not only was Myu there, but Remia was as well...and she looked quite uncomfortable.

“I-It’s not what you think, Myu! I just—”

“Why are you looking for more daughters when you already have me, you cheater?!”

“Wait, who even taught you that phrase?! Come back, Myu, I promise daddy isn’t cheating on you!”

Myu ran out of the door, so Remia turned to chase after her, but just before she left she looked over her shoulder and said, “Umm, Hajime-san?”

“Remia! This is all one big misunderstanding! Please believe me!”

“O-Of course. That’s Yue-san, right? I understand that much. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“I think Myu is still a bit too young for you. Please be satisfied with just Yue-san for now.”

“No, no, no, you’ve got it all wrong! I’m not a pedophile I swear! Remia, waaaaaait!”

Remia also ran out of the room, mistakenly believing that Hajime had some truly deplorable fetishes.

“Yue, I’m sorry, but please stop messing around with metamorphosis magic. At this rate, there are going to be so many misunderstandings that—”

“Hajime, Hajime, what about this?”

“Holy shit, you’re so cute! It’s like cuteness terrorism!”

While Hajime had been talking to Remia and Myu, Yue had once again transformed, this time into an appearance reminiscent of Tio’s. She was wearing the red kimono that Venri had gifted her as well. She’d left the front open to expose her now-voluptuous breasts, and she was wearing her hair tied up to bare her beautiful neck. However, since today was a day of horrible coincidences, that was, of course,

the exact moment that Tio chose to walk in.

“M-Master?” Tio said, tears forming in her eyes. “Am I not good enough for you?!”

Before Hajime could say anything, Yue turned to her with a grin.

“Heh...”

That was enough for Tio to also run out of the room in tears, though unlike the others, she seemed to also be panting in excitement as she left.

“How dare you, Yue! Waaaaaaaah!”

It was rare to see her crying for real, however, and as she left, Shea came to see what all the commotion was about.

“What’s going on in here? Yue-san, what did you do this time?” Shea asked, giving Yue a stern look.

After a moment of thinking, Yue grinned and transformed back into her seventeen-year-old self.

“Prepare yourself, Shea. I’m going to show you why I’m Hajime’s first wife.”

“Huh?”

Shea gave Yue a confused look as Yue put the kimono back into her Treasure Trove and stood before Shea in the nude. Enjoying Hajime’s eyes on her, she took a swimsuit with a skirt out of her Treasure Trove and started putting it on. It was white with blue ribbons, and of course, it looked exactly like the clothes Shea usually wore. Once she was dressed, she struck a sexy pose, looking more alluring than ever.

Gaze upon me and despair, Shea! Yue thought, grinning triumphantly at the bunny girl. She still hadn’t forgotten the beating Shea had given her back in the Frost Caverns. Unfortunately for Yue, she still was no match for Shea.

“Wow, where did you get that, Yue-san?! It looks just like my usual clothes!”

“Huh? Oh, well, umm, normally, it’s too embarrassing to wear the clothes you do, but I thought they might work as a swimsuit, so I...”

“Ha ha ha, and you wanted to match colors with mine. I get it!”

Shea smiled happily. Unaware of Yue’s true intentions, she was just glad to have a matching outfit with Yue, so she sidled up next to her and rubbed her cheek against hers.

Yue blushed in embarrassment as Shea proudly exclaimed, “Look, Hajime-san! We’re matching! Don’t we look like sisters right now?”

“Yeah, you sure do. It’s great,” Hajime replied, smiling gently at Shea.

Seeing that expression, Yue realized that she’d been completely defeated by this pure bunny girl. She slumped to the floor and started pounding the ground with her fists.

“I can’t believe it; I lost!” she shouted, prompting Shea to bend down in worry.

“Yue-san?! What’s wrong?! Are you feeling sick?! Here, I’ll carry you to bed!”

As Hajime watched Shea tenderly carry Yue to bed, he knew for a certainty that Yue would never be able to defeat Shea.

Venri-san’s Bridal Training

[This short story contains spoilers, so please finish the main series before reading this!]

A few days had passed since Hajime had recrafted the means to return to Earth. Right now, Hajime and the others were visiting the dragonman village in the far north. Once they actually made the trip it would be a few weeks before Hajime had enough mana to return to Tortus again, so he wanted to let Tio spend some time with her family before they left. Tio had invited Hajime and the others to come with her, so they had. On the first night, there had been a huge banquet to welcome everyone, and it was now noon the day after.

“Do you understand, Yue-sama? The fundamentals are vital.”

“Yes...”

“Without the fundamentals, you can’t accomplish anything. You need to practice doing things the hard way or you’ll never understand—hey, you just took a shortcut with magic again, didn’t you? How many times do I have to tell you you can’t rely on magic for everything?!”

“I’m sorry...”

Yue and Venri were currently in the Klarus family home’s kitchen. Both of them were wearing aprons.

“Forget teaching you how to cook, I need to start by teaching you how to wash and cut the ingredients. How did you manage to turn the kitchen into such a mess?”

The cutting board on the counter was split in two, there were holes in all of the pots and pans, the stove was half-melted, and the ingredients were all cut into too-fine pieces.

“I’m sorry...”

“Instead of constantly apologizing, stop rushing into things before you’ve even learned the basics.”

Venri had also checked to see how Yue handled other chores like cleaning and laundry, but had discovered that Yue used wind and water magic to cheat her way through those as well. When it came to household chores, Yue’s genius had backfired on her. The moment she saw a task and thought she’d found a more efficient way of tackling it, she immediately felt compelled to try her novel method, but more

often than not it ended with disastrous results.

“Your sewing is all right, but the rest of your skills are sorely lacking. Forgive me for asking, but how did you take care of the cooking and cleaning while you were traveling?”

“Shea took care of most of it,” Yue said, puffing her chest out proudly.

“That’s not something to be proud of!”

Yue looked down, suitably chastised. Venri had lived thrice as long as Yue, and was the very model of a wise and stern dragonman that Yue had initially looked up to. Every time Venri looked at her, Yue felt as though she was being seen right through, which made her a little uncomfortable. Had Venri been a vindictive and spiteful mother-in-law who was just finding fault with Yue because she didn’t like that Yue was Hajime’s first wife over Tio, Yue might have been able to argue back. However, Venri wasn’t that petty, and her reasons for training Yue were far too reasonable.

“Yue-sama, listen closely,” Venri said as she cupped Yue’s cheeks gently with her cool hands. “Whether you like it or not, you are the most famous bride in all of Tortus’s history. I know better than anyone what a wonderful woman you are, but when a person becomes famous enough, people inevitably try to find fault with them. And don’t forget, Hajime-sama will be marrying women from many different races, nationalities, and cultures. As the first wife of that household, you will be held to an unreasonable standard by the general public. Right now, everything is fine because people’s memories of Ragnarok are still fresh. But as time passes people will forget. Unlike the other girls, who contributed directly to the fighting, you were the one person who needed to be rescued. Sure, Hajime-sama may have told everyone that it was with your help that he defeated god, but no one actually saw you fight. Once enough time passes, people will start to talk. They’ll start saying that the girl from their race or culture is more deserving of the title of first wife. I’m not saying you have to be perfect, or even that you have to push yourself very hard. Why, with your strength, you can easily ignore what others say. You, or Hajime-sama, or one of the other girls can shut anyone up easily enough.”

“Mhm.”

After saying all that, Venri’s expression became stern once more. It was the kind of sternness that stemmed from genuine care though, and Yue could tell Venri was saying this for Yue’s own good, even if Yue ended up hating her for it. Thus, Yue decided to give Venri her utmost attention, and looked directly into the dragonman’s eyes, ready for whatever she had to say.

“But what I want to know, Yue-sama, is whether or not you can accept that. Will your pride allow you to be a first wife who isn’t truly

fit for the title?"

"No, definitely not."

"Good," Venri replied with a satisfied nod, then patted Yue on the head. Yue felt a warm fuzzy feeling in her chest and blushed a little.

"D-Don't treat me like a child."

"He he, from my perspective, you are still a child."

If Yue went into adult mode, there was practically no one who could resist her allure. But for some reason, Yue had a feeling her charms wouldn't work on Venri. It would be really embarrassing if they didn't either, so Yue was too scared to even try.

"Mmm, I'll do my best to master your training," Yue said, her determination renewed.

"Very well. But we should take a short break for now."

"Huh?"

Yue was taken aback. Venri had just gotten her all pumped up, but now she was saying they should stop.

"I suspect that it's precisely because your control over magic is so fine that you're unable to properly put it to good use when it comes to cooking and cleaning."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Before I explain, there's something I want to give you. Follow me," Venri said before she led Yue to her room and directed her to stand in front of a splendid full-length mirror.

"Yue-sama, please take this."

"Is this a...kimono? The kind dragonmen wear?"

"Yes. Among dragonmen, it's customary to give your child a kimono when they're getting married. I'm afraid I haven't been able to make enough for everyone yet, but this is yours."

It seemed Venri was planning on making kimonos for all of Hajime's wives, not just Tio. Yue let out a sigh of wonder as she took the kimono and ran her fingers across the fabric.

"Perhaps I should have consulted with you before deciding on a design, but I thought red would match your eyes perfectly."

Indeed, the kimono was the red of autumn leaves with a white flower pattern. There was golden embroidery on the sleeves as well, and it was obvious it had been designed with Yue's characteristics in mind.

"Since we're already here, why don't I teach you how to put it on?"

The kimono had been made with Yue's adult proportions in mind, so she transformed into adult form.

"Umm...thank you very much," she said shyly.

"He he, you're welcome. Please look after our princess for us."

"Mmm, I will. I promise to make everyone happy."

“Also, please do something to fix her horrible fetishes.”

“Umm, that might not be possible...”

“If you can’t manage that much, then how can you call yourself Hajime-sama’s first wife? Did you not just decide to train yourself up into a woman capable of doing anything? Oh, and be wary of the food and water in Hajime-sama’s world; who knows what it might do to your body. Be sure to show proper respect to his parents as well, you don’t—”

“O-Okay, okay, I get it already!”

Venri continued listing off warnings like a worried mother, but Yue could tell from the look in her eyes that she was genuinely concerned for Yue. Yue almost called her “mother,” but then caught herself at the last second and looked away bashfully.

“There you go, Yue-sama. You look wonderful.”

“Thank you...”

Indeed, Yue did look stunning in the kimono. But she didn’t have the same sensual appeal she normally did. No, it was a more artistic beauty she exuded now.

“All right, back to your bridal training,” Venri said after a few seconds, snapping Yue out of her reverie.

“Huh?! While I’m wearing this fancy kimono?!”

“Yes. The very same one I stayed up all night to sew,” Venri replied with a terrifying smile, and Yue’s expression stiffened. “You won’t get it dirty, will you?”

It seemed the reason Venri had made Yue change was to force her to concentrate on performing well because now there were consequences for failure.

Gulping, Yue replied, “O-Of course not!”

This was one woman Yue decided she would never cross.

Taste Testing Vampire Hajime

[This short story contains spoilers, so please read it after finishing the main series!]

“So why am I being blindfolded and tied to this chair?” Hajime asked sullenly. He was in his room in the lodge they were staying at in Verbergen. Of course, if he wanted, he could easily break his way out of these restraints, but he still wanted to know what the point of them was.

“Because you said you were going to reverse your vampirification,” Yue said in a sad voice.

“That’s right, Hajime-kun! We can’t let you turn back until we know for sure!” Kaori added.

“We need the official ranking!” Shea added.

“That’s right! I’m fully prepared to be the lowest-ranked!” Tio declared.

“You can’t just turn back without at least trying, right? Besides, I want to know how I taste,” Shizuku said.

“That’s right, Nagumo-kun I need to know if my blood is tasty or not. And how tasty it is compared to everyone else’s!” Aiko exclaimed.

All five of them were Yue’s accomplices in this kidnapping. The conversation made it abundantly clear why they were tying him up.

“Mmm. All right, let the official blood taste test begin!” Yue said with a satisfied nod.

About two weeks had passed since Ragnarok, and Hajime had yet to reverse his vampirification. Part of it was because Yue had been reluctant to let him, but it was also because a vampire’s powers were closely linked to spirit magic, and sucking other people’s blood had actually helped Hajime recover his soul’s deep exhaustion faster. Of course, plain old restoration and spirit magic would have worked just as well, but the bloodsucking process was highly pleasurable for both parties, so everyone in Hajime’s harem was now hooked on getting drained. And naturally, everyone’s thoughts had turned to whether or not their blood was actually tasty, and if Hajime liked their blood more than everyone else’s.

“This is your own fault, you know, Hajime-kun? If you hadn’t just said ‘it’s okay’ every time any of us asked how our blood tasted, we wouldn’t have had to resort to such drastic measures.”

“I told you before, remember? I’m only half-vampire, so I can’t really make out your blood’s taste or anything.”

Indeed, Yue’s vampirification spell had been an improvised one she’d come up with on the spot under dire circumstances, so Hajime was a far cry from a normal vampire. However, that excuse wouldn’t cut it.

“You’re lying, I can tell! Don’t underestimate a teacher, we can tell when our students are acting shifty!” Aiko said, pointing at Hajime.

“What kind of teacher wants her student to taste her, Sensei...” Hajime muttered.

“C-Call me Aiko, not Sensei!”

“Sensei-dono, you can’t appeal to your authority as a teacher if you want me to call you by your name,” Hajime said with a mischievous grin.

Aiko desperately tried to think of a rebuttal to that while Yue continued to press the attack.

“Hajime, I don’t know why you’re so insistent on pretending like you can’t tell our tastes apart, but we’re all dying to know. We won’t be able to sleep at night until you tell us. Just do this one ranking and

I'll turn you back into a human."

Realizing that Yue wouldn't let him go no matter what, Hajime finally gave up. He then turned to Shea and said, "Fine, but give me your finger instead of your neck. I'm not really in the mood to drink from your neck right now."

"Huh? I mean, sure, I guess, as long as you give me a proper rating."

Shea cut the tip of her finger and brought it to Hajime's lips. Hajime sniffed at her finger for a few seconds, then blushed a little and gulped. Normally, he bit into Shea's neck so she couldn't really see his expression, but now she was able to watch him closely. Steeling his resolve, Hajime placed Shea's finger into his mouth and sucked greedily.

"O-Oh my..."

"Mmm, this is rather unexpected."

It was only now that Yue and the others realized just how lewd of a sight this was. Hajime was blindfolded and tied to a chair, blushing slightly and panting a little as he sucked on Shea's finger. Kaori and Shizuku went bright red and averted their gazes, while Aiko covered her face with her hands and Tio hid her expression behind her sleeve, though she kept watching intently. As for Shea, she had an expression of pure ecstasy on her face and looked like she was about to awaken to a new fetish. It was only when Hajime finally started giving his thoughts on Shea's blood that everyone remembered what the original goal of this exercise was supposed to be.

"Shea's blood is rich and full-bodied, with a silky smooth finish and a fresh aftertaste."

"What are you, some kind of blood gourmand?!" Kaori, Shizuku, and Aiko exclaimed in unison. But of course, they were the ones who'd asked for his ratings, so they dutifully had Hajime taste all of their blood in turn.

"Kaori's blood is thick and has a really powerful, soothing flavor."

"Shizuku's blood is well-balanced and light."

"Aiko, your blood has a fruity taste and is a nice sweet and sour combo."

"Tio, your blood has a nice aged taste, like vintage wine."

"Yue, your blood is just perfect."

For all his protesting, Hajime made for a great blood taste critic.

"W-Well, that was a lot more in-depth of an analysis than I was expecting... But then, whose blood is the best?" Shizuku asked.

"Yue's," Hajime replied without hesitation.

"Hajime-kun, what about me? Where do I rank on the blood ranking?!" Kaori asked.

"In order, it goes Shea, then Tio, then Aiko, then Shizuku are

about equal, though I have a slight preference for one or the other depending on the day, then you. Sorry, Kaori, but you're last."

"Whyyyyyy?!"

"Don't take it too hard, Kaori-san. It's probably because you're in an apostle's body, right?"

"Oh yeah..." Kaori mumbled, remembering that she still hadn't swapped bodies back yet. Apostles technically did have blood flowing through their veins and since Kaori's soul was in this body, it affected the taste of her blood, but the base materials were still Ehit's.

"You guys happy now? Yue, hurry up and turn me back to normal."

"Mrrr... Do you really hate being a vampire that much, Hajime?" Yue said in a despondent voice.

Hajime took off the blindfold and undid his ropes, then looked his beloved vampire princess right in the eyes.

"It's not that I dislike it. In fact, I'd be fine being a vampire forever, but...there's a problem."

"W-Wait, is it causing your body problems or something? I'm so sorry!" Yue said in a worried voice, and Shea and the others looked up in alarm as well. They wouldn't be able to bear it if Hajime had been sacrificing his own body for their sake.

However, Hajime simply smiled grimly and shook his head.

"It's not that. If anything, my compatibility with vampirism might be too high."

"What does that mean, Hajime-san?"

"The truth is, as time passes, I'm getting more and more attuned to the smell of blood. Even when people aren't actively bleeding, I can sniff out their blood and it's messing with my head. Whenever I see someone, all I think about is how delicious they are."

"O-Oh..." Kaori, Shizuku, and Aiko said simultaneously, blushing a little. Indeed, the whole reason Hajime had avoided mentioning the taste of everyone's blood was to stop himself from wanting to drink more of it. That was also why he'd asked to drink from their fingertips instead of their necks.

"Even right now, I just picked up a new scent...and it smells so good that—" Hajime cut himself off as he turned toward the doorway. Yue and the others followed his gaze.

"I-I did knock five times, you know? But I figured since it's me, you wouldn't notice me unless I did something flashy."

Standing in the doorway was none other than Kousuke Endou. No one knew how long he'd been there. While everyone else was too stunned to say anything, Kousuke hugged himself and said, "I-I don't think I'd taste very good."

"Y-Yeah, my bad..." Hajime said, averting his gaze awkwardly.

The fact that he was apologizing instead of just making a joke shocked Shea and the others. He was showing Kousuke more consideration than he showed any of them, and that convinced them that this vampire transformation couldn't stay.

"Yueeeeeee, hurry up and turn him back! Quickly! Or else Hajime kun will—"

"O-Okay. Don't worry, I won't let Hajime go down the wrong path."

Yue then instantly cast the spell to reverse Hajime's vampirification.

Arifureta Academy—The Graduation Ceremony

There was a solemn air in the magic academy's auditorium. Today was the high school department's graduation ceremony and everyone—from the graduating students to the visiting family members to the faculty—was quite nervous. However, the students and faculty were nervous for a very different reason than the parents.

"Shea Haulia."

The opening speeches had concluded without incident, so now the students were being called up to receive their diplomas. The top students in their respective specialties were being called up first, which just so happened to include one of the academy's biggest problem children. To everyone's surprise, instead of giving her usual cheerful reply, she stood up solemnly and walked gracefully up to the podium. Everyone who knew her was shocked by such uncharacteristic behavior, but the parents and guests all just thought she looked very pretty.

"Ahem! Shea Haulia, this diploma is proof that you graduated at the top of your class in the close-combat department. Congratulations," Freid Bagwa, the head of the high school branch of the academy, said as he handed Shea her diploma.

"Thank you very much," Shea replied with a gentle smile. She was being as polite and well-mannered as possible, which terrified the other students and teachers.

"Umm, we're very proud that a scholarship student like you was able to graduate at the top of the class. That being said, we feel you may have gone too far—ahem, I mean to say you were a bit too overzealous in applying yourself to your studies. Even after you graduate, please don't forget that you do represent our school and remember the value of moderation."

"Oh my, thank you for those words of wisdom."

"Who the hell are you and what have you done with the real Shea Haulia?"

Shea smashed Freid's megaphone with supernatural speed so no one except her heard that last statement. Freid paled as he saw the fragments of his megaphone fall to the ground, while Shea just smiled sweetly and walked back to her seat.

"Oh my, it seems your megaphone is broken, dean," one of the female teachers said, getting up from her seat and walking over to Freid. It was, of course, none other than Yue, though she was in her adult form right now. The parents were so transfixed by her beauty that they began to wonder if any of their kids had been able to pay attention to any classes she taught.

"Oh, umm, I can just use my magic to amplify my voice instead, so—"

"Here, take this. He he, sorry for the trouble everyone."

"Who the hell are you and what have you done with the real Yue?"

Yue used magic to disperse Freid's voice and make sure no one else heard him.

Next, the top student in the healing-magic department, Kaori Shirasaki, was called up. Normally, she started a fight with Yue the moment she saw her, but today she was as much of a saint as everyone who didn't know her believed her to be. Once the diplomas were handed out, Principal Tio came up to give a speech, which she did with surprising grace and decorum.

The students found Shea's and the others' docile demeanors off-putting, but at the same time, they realized this was a very important day, so they figured even those problem children didn't want to ruin it.

Shizuku, Yuka, Professor Laus, and Professor Meld all breathed a collective sigh of relief, glad that they wouldn't have to use force to subdue the problem children today. The entire event proceeded smoothly, but everyone grew steadily more nervous as the closing ceremony approached. That was because they could tell the four problem children of the school were growing tenser by the minute, almost as if the closing speech would signal the start of something they were desperately awaiting. Shizuku and the other members of the disciplinary committee couldn't help but worry that something horrible would happen as soon as the ceremony ended.

"And with that, the graduation ceremony has come to a close. Congratulations to each and every one of you for making it this far. Let's have a round of applause for all of the students graduating on this auspicious day."

Surprisingly, nothing happened and the students were able to exit the auditorium with smiles on their faces. Of course, they didn't lower their guard for even a second. There was no telling when disaster

might strike. In a splendid display of unity, they made sure to keep an eye out for each other while they filed out. Tio praised their solidarity in her closing remarks, and everyone really wanted to say it was her fault they ended up like this, but they kept their emotions in check. If nothing else though, the bonds they'd forged while struggling to survive Yue and the others' tyranny would hold fast for the rest of their lives. The graduating students were confident that no matter what came their way, they'd be able to come together and stand against it.

Impressed by how much their children had grown, the parents all smiled proudly upon seeing such unity among the students. They sent them off with uproarious applause and tears in their eyes. A few of the parents noticed that their children looked like war veterans who'd survived a particularly harrowing battlefield and wondered what exactly had gone on at school.

It was only after the students had all left and the parents were starting to file out to find their respective kids that something finally happened.

"Excuse me! Mother, father!" Yue said, teleporting into the audience stands instantly without a portal. She ignored the surprised looks of the parents around her and made a beeline for a specific couple, grabbing both of their hands.

"Stop right there, Yue-sensei! What are you planning on doing with Hajime's parents?!"

"Aaah, I'm too late!"

"Ngh, the fact that we have to leave the auditorium first really made it too hard for us!"

Indeed, introducing themselves to Hajime's parents, Sumire and Shu, had been Yue and the others' goal from the very start. For all his monstrous powers, Hajime still had parents, and the four problem children's true aim was to convince them that they were Hajime's one true girlfriend and future wife.

"Umm, are you Yue-sensei?"

"We can talk later. I'm sorry for imposing, but this place is filled with unsavory hyenas and Hajime's waiting for us elsewhere, so let's get out of here!"

Before Shea and the others could reach Hajime's parents, Yue instantly teleported them out of there. Sumire and Shu blinked in surprise as they found themselves on a hill overlooking the academy. Hajime was there as well.

"Uhhh, hi mom, hi dad. Are you guys okay? That was a pretty shocking trip, right?"

Sumire and Shu looked at their son, then turned back to the teacher behind them, who was fidgeting bashfully, then turned to

each other and nodded.

“Congratulations on graduating!” they said in sync, seeming completely unfazed by the strangeness of the situation.

“Don’t worry, we can guess what’s going on. We already mostly figured it out from the letters you sent us.”

“Let me guess, you played around with too many girls, and now you’re trying to escape with the one you actually like before the rest of them catch up and give you a piece of their mind?”

“I wouldn’t exactly put it that way.”

While Shu’s statement wasn’t entirely accurate, he did have the gist of it right. Yue was honestly surprised by how quickly they grasped the overall situation.

“So let me guess, you’re madly in love with our son?” Sumire asked, turning to Yue.

Yue broke out in a nervous sweat, her heart pounding in her chest. She’d spent days planning for this very moment, but now that it was at hand, her mind went blank. So instead of the carefully crafted speech she’d prepared, she just responded with the first thing that came to mind.

“I-I-I-It’s nice to meet you! My name is Yue! I’ve already had my way with your son! He’s great! I love him!”

She’d actually wanted to ask them for Hajime’s hand in marriage and tell them she’d make him happy, but this was what came out instead.

Hajime covered his face with his hands, and Yue did the same thing a second later when she realized what she’d just said.

Oh god, I can’t believe I said that! I’m so dumb! she thought.

Yue was expecting Hajime’s parents to give her funny looks, but instead, they just took her statement in stride.

“Why thank you. I guess that means you helped my son graduate school...and from being a virgin!” Shu said with a grin.

“Of course my son’s great; I raised him after all!” Sumire said, puffing her chest out proudly.

“Mom, dad, please shut up.”

Yue perked up a little upon realizing that she hadn’t left a terrible impression. Indeed, Shu and Sumire had pieced everything together from Hajime’s letters already, so they were smiling fondly at Yue.

“We’d love to have someone like you as a daughter-in-law, Yue-sensei. Sorry, I guess I should call you Yue-san now.”

“If anything, a wonderful person like yourself is wasted on our son.”

“Mother, father, I’m so glad you approve. I don’t know if I can live up to your expectations, but please—”

“Hold it right theere!”

Right before Yue could cement her position as Hajime's betrothed, an objection interrupted her. Yue turned and saw Shea, Kaori, and Tio stepping out of a portal. Tio was holding Freid by the collar as she'd kidnapped him to make this portal for them.

"Mother, father, don't be deceived! I'm Hajime-san's real fiancée!"

"No, I'm his fiancée!"

"Mother, father, please reconsider giving Yue your blessing!"

While Shea and the others were trying to convince Sumire and Shu that they were the best choice for Hajime, yet more people started spilling out of the portal. And of course, the moment they spotted Hajime's parents, they started pleading their case to them as well.

Sumire turned to Shizuku and Yuka and said, "Oh my, you're the highly capable Shizuku-san, aren't you? And you're Yuka-san, the school's best chef. My son's told me all about you in his letters. Are you two also bridal candidates?"

Naturally, Shizuku and Yuka both blushed, and Liliana tried to show off her appeal to Sumire as well. Meanwhile, Cam and Mona Haulia tried to convince Hajime to move back to their hometown with them, while Sister Noint and the Seraphim siblings begged Hajime to let them be his maids. Dignitaries from various countries showed up as well, trying to build connections with the prestigious Nagumo family. Myu and Remia showed up too, and Sumire had a grand old time playing with Myu while she dealt with all of Hajime's potential suitors.

"Hajime," Shu said, turning to his son with a gentle smile on his face.

"Wh-What is it, dad?"

"Did you have a fun time at school?"

Blushing awkwardly, Hajime looked away and replied, "Well, it definitely wasn't boring."

A Small Memory Between Uncle and Niece

[This short story contains spoilers, so please finish the main series before reading it!]

The southwest portion of the southern continent was one large wetland. Multiple rivers crisscrossed the swampy area, sunlight glinting off them. Monsters and animals of all sizes roamed the greenery surrounding the water.

"This is a pretty spectacular view," Hajime said as he surveyed the wetlands.

"Mmm, we were lucky today. Normally, there's a lot more mist. It used to help camouflage our nation," Yue said, looking nostalgic.

Hajime smiled gently at her. He much preferred the expression on

her face now than when she'd been trying to ignore all the memories she had of her homeland.

"Let's go, Hajime... I think it's this way."

Yue took Hajime's hand and led him through the swamp. The two of them looked like they were just out on a picnic with the way they admired the scenery as they passed by.

After a while, Yue pointed to a hill on the other side of the riverbank and said, "I-I think that's it."

Her memories had faded with the centuries and she wasn't totally sure the top of that hill was the spot she was looking for, but she felt like she was close.

"Even if you're wrong, we can just keep searching. Worst comes to worst, we can use the compass."

"Mmm..." Yue mumbled and smiled at that, then started working her way up the hill.

"Oh, it's here... It's still here," Yue muttered in wonder, her red eyes looking at a massive tree standing apart from the rest of the greenery. It wasn't very tall, but the trunk was quite wide and its branches spread out to form a large canopy.

"Is this the place?"

"Mhm. I'm sure of it. This is an important place to me, Uncle Deen, and my father."

Hajime was capable of teleporting back to Earth at any time now, but the two of them had come here to search for a place that held a lot of memories for both her and Dienleed.

"This is a good spot for his grave," Yue muttered.

Indeed, they were searching for nostalgic spots so that Yue could build a grave for her beloved uncle. Of course, Dienleed had been dead for centuries now, so there were no remains of his left, but Yue had still wanted a gravestone to leave behind a tangible marker that he'd once lived.

Hajime nodded to her and pulled a cross out of his Treasure Trove. They dug the hole by hand, purposely choosing not to use magic out of respect for Dienleed, and planted the cross in a small hole near the roots of the tree. For a while, the two of them stared at the gravestone in silence...and before long, Yue started to reminisce about a particular moment she'd shared with her uncle here.

"Are you sure you're okay with this spot?"

"Yes, uncle. I like it."

A young Yue—who at the time was called Aletia—was sitting on the roots of the tree with her uncle, Dienleed. She had a napkin spread over her lap and a sandwich in her hands.

"It's your birthday. We could have had a big party at the palace if you wanted..."

“We already had one, remember? I’m tired of sifting through expensive gifts with no thought put behind them and dealing with all the marriage proposals.”

Though she was still young, Aletia was the princess of a kingdom. Moreover, she was known to be a beautiful girl, and two years ago her special magic had manifested, making her a genius in all fields of magic. However, the king had officially banned anyone from asking for Aletia’s hand in marriage. Neither foreign dignitaries nor domestic nobles were allowed to break that rule. Unfortunately, most people thought he was just an overly doting father and had come up with various plans to try to indirectly give their proposals to Aletia at big public occasions like her recent birthday party.

“If I have to attend another party, my business smile is going to end up plastered onto my face forever,” Aletia said, pinching her sore cheeks to emphasize her point. Dienleed smiled sadly in response and shook his head.

“I know how tiring that must be, but I wasn’t suggesting a big public party. I was thinking it’d be a smaller affair where only friends and close relatives will be invited. If nothing else, I’m sure your maids and guards would love the chance to congratulate you.”

“That does sound like it could be fun, but...” Aletia pursed her lips, unsure of how to continue.

Over the past few years, Dienleed had spent a lot of time abroad. He’d even relinquished his title of prime minister to have more free time to do...whatever he was doing. There had been an entire year where he’d been gone without sending even a single message too. Dienleed was the adult Aletia trusted the most in this world, so not being able to see him for long stretches of time had left her lonely. More than anything though, she was getting worried. She could tell the way her beloved uncle looked at her changed. His eyes still had the same gentle warmth and love they always had, but now she could see worry flickering in them too. Whenever she tried to ask him what was wrong, he just deflected with a smile, and that bothered her too. She figured he must have an important reason for keeping his secrets, but that didn’t stop her from feeling left out.

“What, are you too busy to celebrate your niece’s birthday with her? You’ve barely spent any time with me at all these past few years!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, now that’s just not true! I even made sure to come back in time for your birthday this year, didn’t I?”

“Then just let me have my party here with you!” Aletia said with a huff, then stuffed the sandwich into her mouth. It wasn’t a very proper way of eating, and she would have been scolded for it in the palace, but Dienleed just smiled and said nothing. The fact that the

girl he thought of as his own daughter preferred to spend time with him over opening rare and expensive gifts or speaking with the most powerful and influential nobles in the world, all of whom wanted her hand in marriage, made him quite happy.

“How’s my sandwich? I worked hard on my cooking over the past year, so I think it’s gotten pretty good...” Dienleed said.

“It tastes just as awful as always!”

“Hey!”

“You’re good at most things, but your cooking skills are awful.”

“Now that’s just rude! Besides, if you don’t like my food, you can just stop asking me to make it for you.”

“It tastes awful, but I like it anyway.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Man, I don’t get kids these days.”

Dienleed shrugged his shoulders, then started eating his own sandwich.

I don’t think it tastes that bad, he thought, cocking his head.

Seeing his expression, Aletia chuckled. She liked that she could just be herself around her uncle. Her parents doted on her so much that she felt like she couldn’t actually impose on them. The only person who scolded her when she was acting spoiled or gave her a proper response when she asked for something difficult was her uncle.

“I’m a bit worried for your future, you know? You’ll be an adult next year, but I haven’t heard about a single boy you like, Aletia.”

“Where’d that come from? Anyway, those men are all the same. It’s not my fault they’re boring.”

“Is there any kind of boy you’re looking for?”

“Not really, but...I guess there are some things I’d like to see in a guy.” Aletia paused there, then raised one finger into the air and started listing things off. “For one...I’d like it if he looked at me like I was some kind of strange creature.”

“That’s a rather strange thing to want, isn’t it?”

“I think I just want someone who’s not so enamored by me that they’re unable to say no when I ask for something unreasonable.”

“Aletia, are there even people like that out there? Have you gotten so many marriage proposals that your standards have gotten all messed up?”

“Actually, maybe it would be cool to find a guy who’d be willing to attack me when I get taken hostage because he knows I’ll regenerate!”

“Are you sure that’s what you want, Aletia? I’m really worried about your future now!”

Dienleed started lecturing Aletia about having better standards, and though she looked like she was listening to him, she was actually imagining how fun it would be to meet someone who matched that

description.

“Yue?”

Hajime’s voice shook Yue out of her reminiscing. She turned to face him and smiled. It was hard to believe that she’d actually met a man who fulfilled all of the conditions she’d laid out back when she’d been teasing her uncle about the kind of guy she might like.

“What’s up?” Hajime asked.

“Mmm, it’s nothing.”

Hajime cocked his head slightly, prompting Yue to grab his hand. She then turned back to the gravestone that had Dienleed’s name carved into it and thought, *Uncle Deen, I’ve finally found happiness, so please rest in peace.*

Uninhibited Familiars

[This short story contains spoilers so please read it after finishing the main series!]

“Kyuuuuuu!” A cute but spirited battle cry echoed through the halls of the Great Orcus Labyrinth as Inaba the Kickmaster Rabbit dashed through the air. His bulging hind legs were encased in sturdy metallic greaves.

“Hmph!”

His kick connected squarely with his target—Shea—but she didn’t budge an inch. She blocked his kick with her arms and grinned fearlessly at him.

“Kyuuu!”

Inaba launched a series of rapid-fire kicks, but Shea blocked them all. Finally, one of his heel drops managed to hit Shea on the head, but the moment it connected there was a loud clang of metal banging against metal, and Inaba’s eyes widened in surprise. Unfortunately, that left him open to Shea’s counterattack.

“You’ve still got a long way to go, Inaba!”

“Kyuu?!”

Shea grabbed his leg, then threw him with tremendous force. He just barely managed to right himself before crashing into the far wall, but as he absorbed the force of the impact with his legs, he looked up to see Shea’s knee centimeters from his face.

“Never lose sight of your foe!”

Inaba leaped out just in time, and Shea’s kick hit the wall with such force that half of it collapsed. The shockwave from the blow sent Inaba flying, so he was unable to stop Shea’s follow-up attack.

“You’re done for,” she said from behind him. A chill ran down his spine, and a second later, an impact on the back of his head knocked Inaba unconscious.

“Holy crap, you’re so good at fighting it’s scary,” Suzu said, running over to nurse her poor rabbit familiar.

“Shea-san, since when was your body made of metal?” Ryutarou asked in an awed voice.

“Hmm, you went all the way up to Level VII there, didn’t you? I’m impressed Inaba managed to push you that far,” Tio stated, walking over as well.

“Wait, that was just seventy percent of your full strength? That’s terrifying,” Kaori muttered.

“You really are some kind of monster. Can you stop blades with your bare hands too?” Shizuku asked.

“Sh-Shea, when did you get this strong?” Yue asked, stunned.

“Maybe it’s because she reached Level X once already? It looks like she can strengthen herself to that level without warming up now...” Hajime mused.

Even though Ragnarok was over, it seemed Shea was continuing to get even stronger, which amazed even Hajime.

“I know he’s the one who asked for this sparring match, but it turned out to be pretty good training for me too. No wonder he managed to take out the Hydra all on his own,” Shea said, handing Inaba back to Suzu.

Indeed, this sparring match was one he’d requested. Only a few days after everyone had returned from the Sanctuary, Inaba had headed into the Great Orcus Labyrinth alone and restarted his training. At this point, he was strong enough to take out the Hydra by himself, and since Hajime and the others had come down here for some other business, he’d decided to challenge Shea to a sparring match, since she was a fellow rabbit and close-combat specialist.

“Are you okay, Inaba-san?”

“Kyuuu, kyuuu!”

Thanks to the language-comprehension ear cuffs artifact Hajime had given Inaba, everyone could tell he was actually saying, “Goddammit, I didn’t even stand a chance against you. I’m not nearly strong enough yet.”

“B-But it was still amazing how well you fought!” Suzu said.

“That’s right, Inaba. You should be proud you managed to force me all the way to level VII,” Shea added.

“Shea’s gotten really arrogant...” Yue muttered.

“I guess she is technically Inaba-san’s teacher,” Kaori replied.

“It’s rare to see Shea so fired up,” Tio added.

“I guess they get along because they’re both rabbits?” Hajime said. Of course, Shea’s and Inaba’s sensitive rabbit ears picked up their whispered conversation.

“A true warrior fights with his fists, not his words,” Inaba said,

jumping out of Suzu's arms.

"Inaba-san?"

Inaba turned to his master, a burning resolve in his eyes.

"Suzu! Please cancel your contract with me!"

"Huh? Why?! I give you plenty of food and days off, don't I? What more could you want?! If I'm doing anything wrong, I promise I'll fix it!"

"Suzu sounds like a clingy girlfriend right now..." Yue said.

"Oh, I never knew she was such a devoted woman," Tio mused.

"I just hope she doesn't end up stuck with a shitty dude," Shizuku stated, turning to Ryutarou.

"Wait, why are you looking at me when you say that, Shizuku? It's not like Nagumo's much better!" Ryutarou retorted.

"Ryutarou-kun, what did you just say about Hajime-kun?" Kaori asked, a dangerous glint in her eyes.

Suzu ignored all of them, though. Most of the monsters she'd been able to turn into familiars were insects, so Inaba was the only cute fluffy familiar she had. There was no way she was going to let him go that easily.

"Don't worry, I've got nothing against you, Suzu. If anything, I think of you as a dear friend."

"Then why do you want to cancel our contract?!"

"I want to train myself from the ground up without your help!"

"Are you saying I'm getting in your way?! But all I want is to help you!"

"Please understand! This is a journey I need to take by myself!"

"Wait! Please don't leave me, Inaba-saaaaaan!"

Suzu dropped to her knees and stretched her hand out as Inaba bounded off deeper into the labyrinth. It really did look like a man going off to chase his dreams and his girlfriend desperately trying to bring him back.

"Umm...is this my fault?" Shea asked awkwardly.

Yue and the others could only shrug. Just then, a large black silhouette drew close to Suzu.

"Mrrr..."

"Huh? What?"

A small black dragon was nuzzling Suzu's nose. Naturally, it wasn't Tio, but it was one of her black dragon familiars that had managed to escape the destruction of the Sanctuary by hiding in one of Suzu's monster balls. The dragonmen were taking care of most of Tio's surviving familiars, and they'd been putting them to work to help with Heiligh's restoration effort as well as hunt down the few thousand monsters that had escaped the Sanctuary and hidden away in the northern mountains. A few of them had been dispatched to the

Great Orcus Labyrinth as well to keep an eye on who went in and out. Hajime wasn't planning on stopping anyone from trying to conquer the labyrinths, but he did want to know who'd managed to do so. He'd also placed a surveillance artifact in Oscar's house for that same reason, but it helped to also have living creatures keeping an eye on things.

At any rate, it seemed one of those lookout dragons had taken a liking to Suzu.

"Mrrr... Mrrr...?"

"Hm? 'What's wrong? If you need to vent, I'll listen. Also, where do you live?"

"Why is it that you can understand what my familiar is saying when even I can't, Suzu?"

Though Tio could sense her familiars' feelings, she definitely couldn't parse their cries as regular human speech. Also, it was rather worrying that Tio's dragon was acting like a playboy hitting on a girl while she was still recovering from getting dumped by another guy.

Kaori and the others exchanged worried glances, but Suzu was just glad to get a chance to make a contract with anything other than an insect.

"If you become my familiar, I promise I'll feed you well, and I'll do most of the work so you don't even have to lift a finger!"

"Suzu-chan?! I really think you should value yourself more!"

"Suzu-san...if you're like that, then people will just walk all over you..."

"Ryutarou, you need to get it together for Suzu's sake."

"Why are you telling me that?! I mean, I am worried about her, but still!"

Once again, Suzu ignored the comments from the peanut gallery.

"What was that? 'Works for me. Let's get that contract set up?' Hell yes!"

It seemed Suzu had already made a contract with the dragon, and she was quite happy to have one more noninsect familiar. For his part, it seemed like the dragon was grinning, though it was hard to tell.

"Hey, Tio, are you sure that dragon familiar's...safe?"

"What kind of stuff did you teach him? He's way too much of a playboy!"

"Don't pin this on me! I didn't do anything except transform him into my familiar!"

Tio wanted to believe a black dragon that had once served her couldn't possibly be evil, but there was a surprising amount of evidence to the contrary. Seeing how the other black dragons who'd been watching this whole spectacle seemed to be having similar thoughts, she decided she probably needed to have a stern talking-to

with all of them sometime soon.

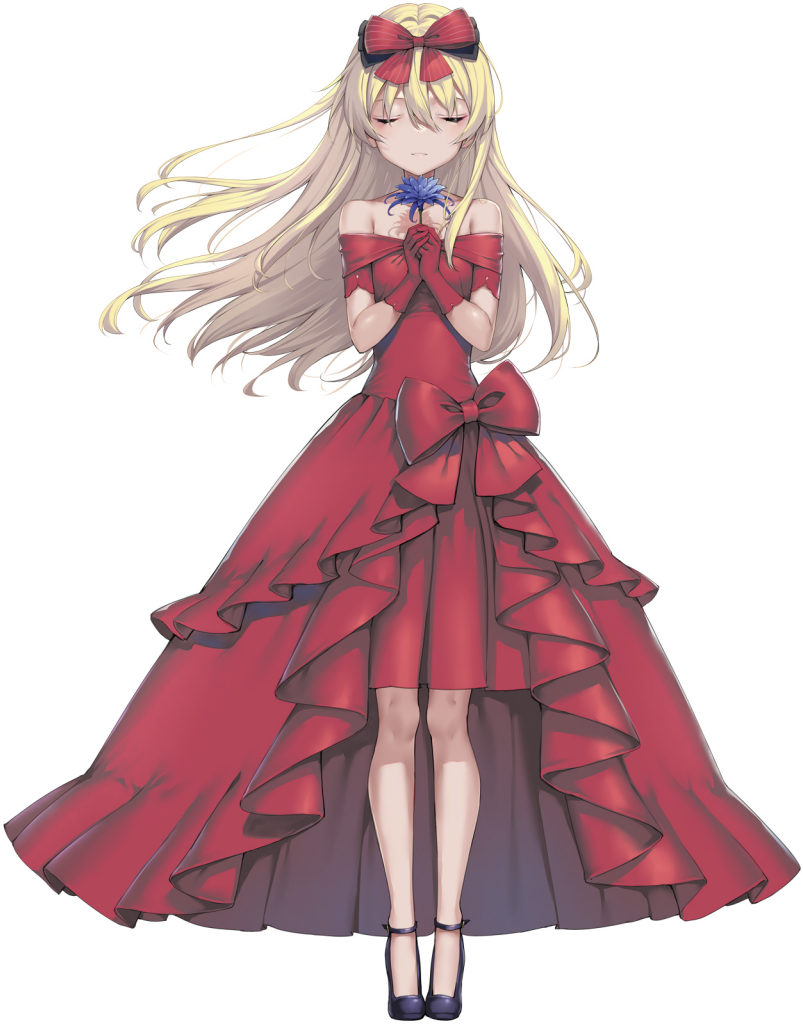






Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter I: Humanity's Full Might

Chapter II: Everyone's Battlefields

Chapter III: The Valkyrie's Pride

Chapter IV: The Truth Behind God and the Final Battle

Chapter V: From Run of the Mill to King of the Hill

Final Chapter: The End of a Journey

Epilogue

Afterword

Extra Chapter: Another Epilogue

Dramatis Personae

Bonus Short Stories

Bonus Textless Illustrations

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